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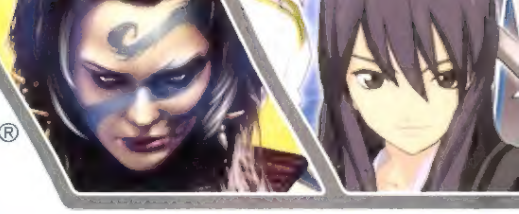

WORLD EXCLUSIVE
TALES OF VESPERIA REVEAL

07 anime year in review

Mirror's Edge

Reflecting on the future of action and adventure

March 2008

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Art by: **LaSean Thomas**

Letter from the Editor

75

Anger Management

I love it when a plan comes together! Like Tomb Raider Underworld and Afro Samurai, Mirror's Edge was another reveal cover that I desperately wanted to secure (it's also our first EA cover in seven years! Can you believe it?). Not only is it the most innovative/fresh approach to action-adventure since the dawn of "next-gen," but it also represents a level of art direction and design unlike anything we've ever seen. This is a truly special game in every sense of the word. Following Tomb Raider: Underworld, Afro Samurai, and Mirror's Edge, our next two covers follow suit; both are exciting reveals. And not on games a year or more away, but games you'll be playing soon.

It gives me great pleasure to inform you, our loyal readers, that a big part of our ability to land these types of covers is you. We may not have the biggest numbers but we definitely have the most active readers where it counts... at the check out. Our optimistic look at the industry also seems to factor in. For a pastime as fun as gaming we seem to be the only magazine enjoying ourselves. There's never been a better time to be a gamer; I mean, we're having a blast over here. Having suffered through the '80s and '90s where quality games were the exception to the rule (most games were crap), the last seven years since we started Play have seen a steady climb in quality. I know it's going against the grain to say that most games these days appeal to their target demographic—there are certainly exceptions to the rule—but there's no arguing that gaming on the whole has just passed a major milestone. We have a full-blown indie movement on the rise, a booming portable market, an exciting new casual market driven by amazing new franchises like Guitar Hero and Rock Band, and more triple-A games in development than ever before. So, why are the Internet and press rife with people who seem to love to hate games? Good question. I don't do game sites or chat rooms so I'm not even sure what all the hating is about, but day in and day out it's all I hear about, how someone dissed a great game, or is pounding on a fellow journalist. I get a few (like 2-5 a month) hate letters of my own griping about how we score games too high. They obviously don't read Play as I've explained our philosophy over and over, but I'm pretty sure that none of them really play games. Seems like they pretty much surf the web and then grab a torch. Anyway—to each their own. Misery loves company. I hope they stay angry. I'm really enjoying all the attention. Don't miss my editorial next month by the way... the winds of change are blowing.

Dave Halverson Editor in Chief

play magazine staff

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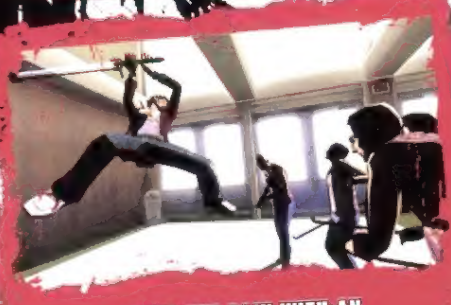

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CAPCOM®

March 2008

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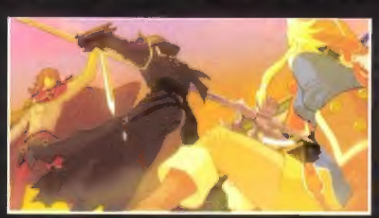

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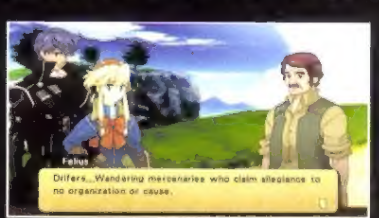

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NPD Group

database

March 2008

Database NPD Year in Review

The Dust has settled
NPD analyst Anita Frazier chimes in on the year gone by...

Overall

"The U.S. video games industry rose an astounding 43% in 2007 bolstered by strong performance in every product category, to achieve a record-shattering $17.9B in sales. While hardware sales realized the greatest percentage growth over 2006 due to the closely scrutinized console hardware transition, each category under the video games industry umbrella reached their own 'personal bests' in terms of annual sales."
"While I wouldn't count on similar growth in 2008, I would expect to see 2008 increase over 2007, with more growth (proportionately) coming from software sales. While we will continue to see strong hardware sales, particularly if prices come down again, the spotlight now turns from hardware to software."

Hardware

"I've been asked a lot if PS3 and Xbox 360 hardware sales were likely to benefit from the scarce supply of Wiis at retail (relative to demand). Since hardware sales are most influenced by the kinds of games a consumer wants to play, and it would appear that the PS2 was a more likely 'substitute choice' in that scenario. Given the breadth of available content and the price point of the PS2, it's a mass market friendly choice and will continue to be an important part of the games ecosystem for several years."
"Both the PS3 and the Xbox 360 realized strong month-over-month hardware sales increases. The 360 in particular seems to have benefitted from a killer slate of hardware-acquisition-driving content including COD4, Assassin's Creed and Halo 3."
"Nintendo has certainly been the belle of the hardware ball this year, capturing the top two spots for hardware units sales for the year with the DS followed by the Wii. The DS has driven portable gaming to a new level, and for the second year in a row, the DS has been the top-selling hardware platform."

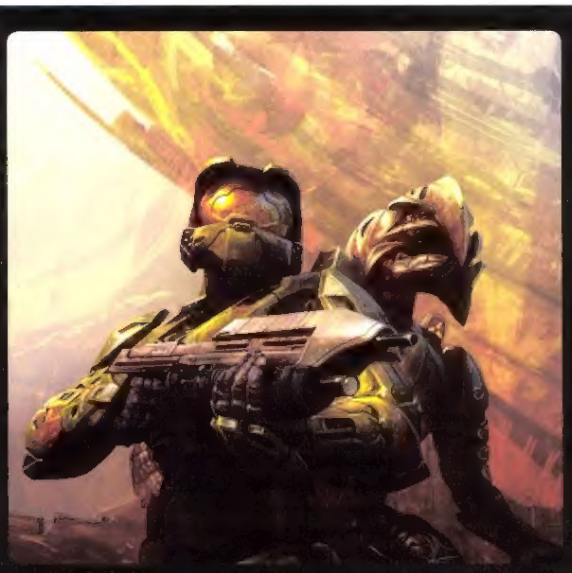
> "I've been asked a lot if PS3 and Xbox 360 hardware sales were likely to benefit from the scarce supply of Wiis at retail...."

Software

"Halo 3 captured the top-spot in single-game sales for the year selling 4.8 million units at retail. This performance certainly puts it among the elite in gaming history with performance similar to that of GTA: Vice City in 2002, and GTA: San Andreas and Halo 2 in 2004."
"If Halo 3 was the game of the year (in terms of sales), one has to recognize the tremendous success of the Guitar Hero franchise. Guitar Hero games sold over $820 million at U.S. retail which is a record for any single franchise in any one year."
"In a year of records, we'd be remiss not to talk about Mario. Mario was the second-best selling video games property for the year and remains the historically best-selling property in the video games industry."

Accessories

"All those hardware sales greatly helped the accessories category to realize a 52% increase over last year's sales. The Wii remote and the Wii Nunchuk combined for over 8.5 million in units sales last year, capturing the top two spots in accessories sales. A lot of folks are curious about the performance of the HD-DVD add-on from Microsoft. Life-to-date, 316K units of that accessory have been sold, representing a 3.5 attach rate to hardware sales."



Top Selling Games Annual 2007

01	360 Halo 3	4.82 million
02	Wii Play w/remote	4.12 million
03	360 Call of Duty 4	3.04 million
04	PS2 Guitar Hero III: Legends of Rock	2.72 million
05	Wii Super Mario Galaxy	2.52 million
06	NDS Pokemon Diamond Version	2.48 Million
07	PS2 Madden NFL 08	1.90 million
08	PS2 Madden NFL 08	1.90 million
09	360 Assassin's Creed	1.87 million
10	Wii Mario Party 8	1.82 million

Top Selling Games December 2007

01	360 Call of Duty 4	1.47 million
02	Wii Super Mario Galaxy	1.40 million
03	PS2 Guitar Hero III: Legends of Rock	1.25 million
04	Wii Play w/remote	1.08 million
05	360 Assassin's Creed	893.7k
06	360 Halo 3	742.7k
07	NDS Brain Age 2	659.9k
08	PS2 Madden NFL 08	655.2k
09	360 Guitar hero III: Legends of Rock	624.6k
10	Wii Mario and Sonic: Olympic Games	613.0k

Lost Odyssey
A thousand years of memories lost. It's time to discover them.
From the famed creator of Final Fantasy, Hironobu Sakaguchi, comes a revolutionary RPG experience rich in depth, emotion and cinematic gameplay. In an age that has harnessed the dark power of magic, you are the mysterious immortal Kaim — on a quest to reclaim 1,000 years of lost memories. Unlock a past infused with love, betrayal and war to reveal the path to reclaim your life and rescue the world.
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We told you so...

More predictions for Mad Propet

Since we last visited our friendly neighborhood development studio Contra 4 has been selected as a finalist in the Game Developer's Choice Awards in the best handheld game category along with Puzzle Quest: Challenge of The Warlords, The Legend of Zelda: Phantom Hourglass, and Phase. Hosted by legendary game developer come comic book mogul Jason Rubin, the winners will be announced at this year's GDC, the world's largest professionals-only game industry event. These are the games that developer's themselves consider the best, so it's quite the honor. Also note that game developers only play a choice amount of games—usually those surrounded by the most hype or biggest budgets, so don't expect anything off the beaten path to get a nod; that's our job.

WayForward has also announced the formation of a Shantae fan club based on continued and growing interest in the Shantae brand. The hair-whipping, belly-dancing genie has continued to grow in popularity despite her public absence since the Capcom-published game in 2002 for the Game Boy Color. Amongst rumblings of unpublished games and continued rumors regarding the character's future, fans have been clamoring to see more of Shantae. In an effort to reawaken publisher interest, WayForward is providing an official voice for fans of the character to bring her back to current platforms. You can now visit www.wayforward.com and sign up for the Shantae fan club where you'll also get access to exclusive updates including screen shots and original concept art from the Shantae franchise. It isn't often that we see a grass roots campaign to get a game off the ground so unless you have something against awesome platformers do drop by.

Inside Trading

The Gooze is loose

Goozex, the leading online video game trading community, has announced their 2007 year-end trading stats lead by Gears of War, which lead the most traded and offered categories on Goozex for the year.

Based on an automated point system, games are assigned a point value based on several factors including supply and demand, and users earn points when trading their games with other users. Points can then be redeemed for other video games. The system offers its users a fair market value for their games and guarantees all trades. The Goozex trading system experienced enormous growth, closing the year with 14.2 mill on Goozex points exchanged among its members. Goozex points are used as a virtual currency to acquire games for all major platforms by members. On January 1, 2007, the company recorded 12,200 titles offered in the system's library. The size of the library increased 605% over the year closing with 86,000 games. You can see what it's all about by visiting www.goozex.com.

Top 10 Most Traded Games on Goozex in 2007

01	Gears of War – Xbox 360
02	The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess – Wii
03	God of War – PS2
04	Halo 2 – Xbox
05	Bioshock - Xbox 360
06	Dead Rising - Xbox 360
07	Super Paper Mario – Wii
08	Crackdown - Xbox 360
09	New Super Mario Bros. – Nintendo DS
10	The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion - Xbox 360

Top 10 Most Requested Games on Goozex in 2007

01	Assassin's Creed - Xbox 360
02	Gears of War - Xbox 360
03	The Orange Box - Xbox 360
04	Bioshock - Xbox 360
05	Super Paper Mario – Wii
06	Mass Effect - Xbox 360
07	Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare - Xbox 360
08	Dead Rising - Xbox 360
09	The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess – Wii
10	Metroid Prime 3: Corruption – Wii

Top 10 Most Offered Games on Goozex in 2007

01	Gears of War - Xbox 360
02	Crackdown - Xbox 360
03	Bioshock - Xbox 360
04	Dead Rising - Xbox 360
05	Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter - X360
06	Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six: Vegas - Xbox 360
07	The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess – Wii
08	Halo 2 – Xbox
09	The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion - Xbox 360
10	Saints Row - Xbox 360

Game Developer's Choice Awards Nominees

Best Game Design
BioShock
Call of Duty 4
Mass Effect
Portal
Super Mario Galaxy

Best Visual Art
Assassin's Creed
Team Fortress 2
Crysis
BioShock
Uncharted: Drake's Fortune

Best Technology
Halo 3
Crysis
Call of Duty 4
Portal
Assassin's Creed

Best Writing
Portal
God of War II
Mass Effect
Half-Life 2: Episode 2
BioShock

Best Audio
Call of Duty 4
Everyday Shooter
BioShock
God of War II
Mass Effect

Best Debut
Crackdown (Realtime Worlds)
flOw (ThatGameCompany)
The Witcher (CD Projekt)
Everyday Shooter (Queasy Games)
Aquaria (Bit Blot)

Innovation
Rock Band
Portal
flOw
Peggle
Mass Effect

Best Handheld Game
Puzzle Quest: Challenge of The Warlords
The Legend of Zelda: Phantom Hourglass
Phase
Contra 4
Peggle (for iPod)

Best Downloadable Game
Pac-Man Championship Edition
Everyday Shooter
Peggle
Puzzle Quest: Challenge of The Warlords (XBLA version)
Flow

Game of the Year
BioShock
Call of Duty 4
Portal
Rock Band
Super Mario Galaxy

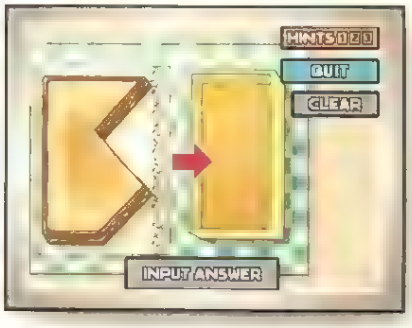
Oopsies...

Tales from the typo zone

We found a glitch in the last (Feb.) issue as we were achin' to get home for the holidays. Somehow the name Paul Gardner (Game Director on Afro) morphed into Peter Gardener in our Afro Samurai feature. Sorry Paul!

Using scraps left over from your breakfast, you've managed to cobble together a rather oddly shaped sandwich.

How many times must you cut the sandwich in order to make it fit neatly in the container?



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Mirror's

Mirror's Edge producer Tom Farrer and senior producer Owen O'Brien have just laughed at me, good hearty laughs at that, but I don't think my question is all that funny. I really want to know: what the hell kind of voodoo tricks are you playing to make the citytop I'm watching Farrer bound across look so good? Still laughing, O'Brien proclaims, "That's all polygons you're seeing. No, it's a lot of polygons. No, trust us. You would think they'd do that, but no, it's actually all built into the backdrop."

"In terms of some of the new vistas, this is actually kind of small," adds Farrer, inviting the easily aroused gamer imagination to play with the many possible wonders such a space might inspire, a real adventure game that no one attempts to make much these days, in a city of extraordinary vision.

And plenty of little details tucked away in the corners and shadows. "Look at the texture detail down here. It's ludicrous," says O'Brien, zooming down the streets far below, under an overpass and into the crevices where color and light dance and shimmer with a subtle hallucinatory sheen. "You can see the colors in the shadows, the blues bouncing, the orange bleeding onto this object. The shadows taking on the red hues. It's really amazing," adds Farrer.

It's infectious fun observing a developer visibly proud of their work, and proud DICE should be of the tremendously vivid landscape they've splashed onto such a sophisticated canvas. But when the subject of where this sprawling world ultimately guides the gameplay takes the stage, the unguarded enthusiasm falls back a bit.

"When you're trying something new or different, I think you really have to be careful," O'Brien offers. "I think already in the press, we've been kind of quoted as going, 'We're revolutionizing the first-person game.' And we're not saying that. We're not saying that at all, I want to be really clear."

But deep down inside you're really saying, we kick ass.

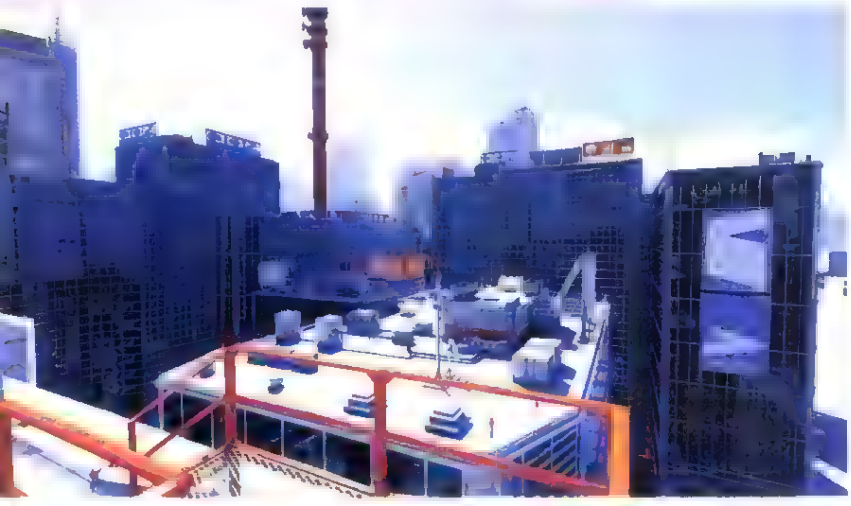
[Laughs]. "We're hoping that's what you say!"

"But yeah, we're trying something different that we think is cool," continues O'Brien. "I mean .. if I say to somebody I am cool, you must believe me, I'm cool. It's for other people to decide whether you're cool or not. It's for other people to decide if this is revolutionary or innovative. Of course we hope it is. The worst thing you can do is stand up there and say, 'We've reinvented the genre.' You're just saying, 'Take a shot at me.' And also, you know, we're kind of modest. It's a Swedish thing as well. I'm not Swedish, he is, the team is, but it's a whole thing that you don't shout too much about how good you are. It's very much that, we think this is cool, so we're doing it."

What DICE is attempting that, on paper invites the talk of all things revolutionary, is a transformation of the first-person perspective, a broadening of the way you interact with the environment and perceive the weight and body—the expressive existence—of the character you are guiding through the space. A simple way of dissecting this approach is to begin by noting the presence of your body within your frame of sight. You've got arms, hands, legs, a torso—a full body moving within the cone of view that would logically form as you run, spin, jump, tumble and climb through the city.

"We're putting you into positions you're not used to being in in a first-person perspective," Farrer points out. "Like lying on your back, that's always occurring in cutscenes and things like that, but that's a fantastic example of the way we make you feel like you have a body, where there's more than just your head moving around. You see you have a body, you watch it as you get up from the ground, giving you a much more physical presence in the world."

"And then getting up, and running toward the next dramatic point, say, doing a wall run and then sprinting off at a 90 degree angle and jumping through the air and landing on a fire escape and vaulting over," says O'Brien, demonstrating his emphatic words with visual grace as I later see more of Mirror's Edge taking shape.



The character he takes through these vigorous motions is named Faith, a . Who s she exactly? She is as "unassuming as she is beautiful," an intrinsic fit within the world. DICE requests that her backstory and the fiction of the city be avoided in print, so for the time being, you'll know her as a "runner"—a morally ambiguous citizen who delivers sensitive packages to some of the metropolis' more criminally wound

As a runner, you'll be doing a lot of running—and vaulting, leaping, grabbing, zip-lining and jumping in Mirror's Edge. Movement is extraordinary but sensible, less video-game acrobatic and more in tune to the gravity of a world not unlike our own. "Athleticism is a better way of looking at it," explains O'Brien. "Initially we shied away from moves that were too much rolling and spinning. We thought that would disorient you too much. So we went for things that were athletic."

Farrer talks of the exhaustive and entertaining research—"we studied billions of moves; just incredible stuff"—that went in to exploring the free-running culture, which serves as a base of reference for Faith's bounding agility. These remarkable athletes see the concrete arteries of a city as a jungle gym, navigating the inclines and overhangs like an ape in the wild. Imagine taking that energy into the game space and you can get an idea of how propulsive the platforming nature s to Mirror's Edge

n a rather abstract but meaningful way, I reference a spirit of Flashback in the scene I'm watching, which hits a pleasant nerve in Farrer. "Ohh, yes. This is very much like Flashback Another World..." These games of adventure, of the kind of interaction with the connective visual lines that really anchor you into the setting, touching the tangible as much as the atmospheric. As a tomb raider in an urban treasure hunt, the prize is seeing a far off crane, a scaffolding snaking up toward an exit point that must be reached

"Perhaps what might be considered a simplistic move we've accentuated, like teetering on the brink of an edge and really looking down these big, big drops," Farrer points out. "In terms of rigging the model and the way the head behaves. If you look at other first-person games, the camera, you know your eyes are central, and when you look down, it's just inverting, so you're literally looking at the ground, but you're standing on an edge You end up looking at the edge, not over it. We define a spine and a neck, which actually swan neck over the edge to help build that sense of vertigo. And also just having the body in general helps create that sensation."

"The rig took a long time to develop," admits O'Brien. "Our camera mimics the eyes more than the head. It's not necessarily motion sickness we're concerned with, it's simulation sickness. There was the concern, this won't work as a first-person, it'll be nausea inducing, you'll get motion sickness. We started to look into it, it's not motion sickness. Motion sickness is something you actually get from motion. Simulation sickness is something you get when there is a disconnect between what you see and what you think you should be seeing [Looks at Farrer] This is something you suffer with."

"Yeah [laughs]. But yes, there is the threat of a disconnect between what a game is telling you and what you are experiencing and what your brain is expecting you to experience. It's really quite a nuanced thing. There are different variations of it, different causes and things like that. Our art director gets it as well We've had good test cases, it's something we worked with a lot, in terms of how we work with the camera and things like that. We did a lot of testing with cameras on heads, looking at how it behaves in real life We came to the conclusion that it's not necessarily about capturing the reality of how you behave when you are running, for example, it's about having the feeling. The reality is that there are so many small adjustments going on with your head, it would be unplayable if you mimicked that

"Through what may / be considered a simplistic male
rather accurately, for villainy on the part of an ugly,
and really, does there need to be any other
-Tom Farris, producer

directly."

Maybe DICE is a little hesitant to tack the "revolutionary" notation onto Mirror's Edge—yes, that's a big word—but there's good reason why the game deserves at least especial attention to just how dramatically removed its sense of movement in the first-person perspective is from anything before it. But there's so much more here to the design construct than jumping around on ramps and grabbing ledges. You have to imagine the complexities of a next-gen-constructed space, with more than one path through and a framework density that has never been attempted.

The dash to the contact point is critical; building momentum and maintaining speed demands a rhythmic push through the environment. Land from a big jump and you have to hit it just right to keep the pace going, get tripped up and you miss sliding under a tight space or offer the pursuing police a better line. For more thrilling moves and steadier control, a finite resource called reaction time builds up by holding extended speeds and completing efficient maneuvers. No move is restricted without it, but it will make your life a lot easier if you claim the benefits of the reaction time.

"One of the maxims we had was, we wanted to be able to do cool things easily, and with skill comes stringing together those cool things and resulting in spectacular things," says O'Brien. "But no individual move should be that hard."

Including opening doors. No need for a key; fetch or mechanical puzzles give way to environmental puzzles, where you must dissect a path to figure out how to make the next area. If there's a door, knock that shit down. With enough speed, push the "agro" button and barge right through. When Faith runs, she doesn't reach full tilt without building up speed first, her breathing increasing along with the rising impact of her feet in stride. DICE talks about wanting to pull off things that are cool, and that is a fine definition of cool when you grab the control for the first time and feel the body of Faith transporting you beyond the familiar first-person perspective.

"So you like that?" asks Farrer.

Oh, I do, and I also like that Mirror's Edge is not being billed as a first-person shooter—you don't even carry a stock weapon—but more of an adventure game with action scenes to traditionally embolden the conflict with the police who are sending you on the run.

"A lot of games are structured, like first-person shooters are structured, move forward, kill everything in an area, proceed, kill more," notes Farrer. "We're not built like that. If you're, say, going to total up the amount of people you are killing, the number is a lot lower than in a typical first-person shooter. The focus of a level is not to kill, fight or disarm or whatever. We've got a lot of focus on escape, on puzzles, avoiding confrontations. Fighting for your life is only one part of it."

"It's absolutely more of an adventure game. It's not a shooter," enforces O'Brien. "It's Faith's story and we want to put you in Faith's shoes. In that regard too, it's first-person, not first-person shooter."

"And that's the thing," Farrer jumps in. "I love first person games. Which is why this idea was so attractive. It always feels like such a missed opportunity. You build these beautiful worlds in these first-person games, but you just kind of wonder around and look at them, kill stuff in them. You never really get to touch it."

When the time does come for killing, Faith must first disarm the enemy with some gold-old-fashioned melee. "You're very dangerous at close range," says Farrer. "As long as you're one-on-one and not one-on-three. At range, the enemy is very powerful. We find when playing it, some people won't use weapons at all. They continue using their mobility taking out enemies and move around them. Or some people throw the gun away before finishing the clip, they just use it to take out one

enemy very fast and move on to another position more quickly..."

"Combat becomes more like a puzzle than a gung-ho, Rambo, run-around-and-try-to-kill-everybody," explains O'Brien. "You have to isolate guys, take the gun off one of them and use it against the other. It becomes a mental exercise as much as a physical one."

Games train us that the best course of action is to carry a gun, but having the ostensible upper-hand with, say, a heavy-grade rifle will take away your ability to move with the same agility you would if unarmed. Weapons apply varying loads of weight, affecting the range of a move set. Whether you choose evasion over confrontation, your ability to tackle a situation is dictated purely through the precision of your actions. There's no armor, pickups, weapon loads, earned moves.

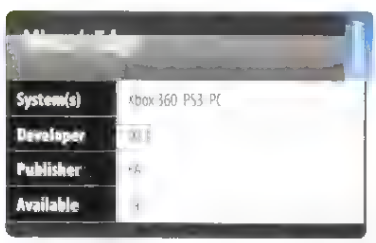
"There is a perfect way of handling every situation," says Farrer. "There are lots of different ways of doing it but there is a perfect route through an area. Some points are there to make you feel great, show off your moves and feel good. When you do arrive to some of the bigger situations, you'll be ready for them."

"In theory you can do all the moves in the beginning. It's just comes down to whether the environments or the level is built to allow you to do them. And then whether the level actually demands you to do them. So when you get further into the game, the moves that we require you to master steps up. And that's one of the difficulty curves. And the other is the type of enemy you meet, that sort of thing."

Sticking with the theme of change, Mirror's Edge isn't your typical apocalyptic terror zone, beholden to the generic motivations that hinder too many projects. "I'm sick of brown games, brown and gray games," admits O'Brien. "We wanted players to move through the world quickly without having to wonder, Can I make this jump or is this the right way to go? So what we did is we got this city, it's sort of a utopia, it is bright and gleaming and clean. We've augmented this with the idea that you see the surroundings as Faith sees it; she sees it in the same way as, say, Jason Bourne looks at a room differently; he'd look at this room and see two exits, he'd see a weapon where I see a pen. It's a way of quickly assessing the world. Everything that's not important to her sort of drops back and is desaturated with colors. Things that are important to her pop out, so, like, red is the important color for runners, red shows potential routes and opportunities in the world. The other colors are there to give an indication of how healthy you are. If you take hits, you'll see the whole world becomes desaturated. I also wanted a game where you look at a screen shot and sat, Ok, that's from Mirror's Edge. I look at other games and I can't tell what game it is, they all look the same."

There's a slight creepiness that rises out of the antiseptic sheen...

"Absolutely... sorry for jumping in, I was gonna talk about, just the perception of the world, the universe that we're creating, our city," says Farrer. "When you look at it from a distance, it's pristine, it's perfect, it's clean, it's a beautiful place. But when you do get in closer, you see that perhaps it's not quite as clean as you first thought. Perhaps it is not as perfect as it appears. That kind of says something about the fiction behind the game as well."



I know you don't want to go into the story, but you seem really intent on the narrative... Let me put it this way, does the story really matter? We hear it all the time, that "story" speech.
O'Brien: The game's Faith's story. It's the journey that she goes through that defines the game. The story is absolutely central to us.

You said from the beginning you absolutely don't want to do another battlefield. Just how much of a clean slate is this?
O'Brien: Well, I feel it's really a clean slate for sure. A lot of the guys on the team have worked on Battlefield, so I think we've taken the first-person skills and awareness and experience we've got there, we know what it feels like to play in the first-person And we know how much more we want from it. If anything what we did is, we took the exact opposite of battlefield but kept it first-person, and that's where we started So it's not huge rolling fields, it's a dense city. It's not about guns and vehicles, it's about a person and their physicality We actually deliberately started at the opposite spectrum of Battlefield
Farrer: All of the experience of building first-person games, that's obviously a spring board to taking first-person.. we're not going to focus the first-person on the weapon, we're going to focus on the body. Now we've moved off into that direction.

Was having the body, the experience of being in that character, was that ingrained from the start? Could you have abandoned that idea?
O'Brien: No, this just would not work without it. As you saw from the first sketches we made, it was primary that we had to have the body. It was the core of the game, through the body, through the character experience.
Farrer: And I think that's why we've succeeded. We only allowed ourselves that one thing. Maybe other people have tried this and then gave up and kind of went, Ok, this just isn't working, let's give you a bigger gun. We deliberately didn't give ourselves anything to fall back on.

You had to nail it.
O'Brien: We had to nail it. And it wasn't one big problem we solved, there wasn't one eureka moment. There are just a lot of little annoying things you have to keep getting through. It's not like we were sitting there and found the holy grail and cracked it, it's just that we kept at it. But yeah, there's just a lot of annoying things involved Any one of them could have been enough to just say, fuck it, let's make a battlefield
Farrer: At the beginning, the animators were going, we simply can't do this, it won't work, you'll get sick, you'll get disoriented, everything that everyone else has said.

Was that the issue that always came up?
O'Brien: It's everything, really. You can't do jumping in first-person, you can't judge distances, there's a million things. I think one of the main reasons people say that is, because no one does it. Taking the crossing the bridge example in Half-Life 2, it's a great looking and great feeling piece. But the platforming element is really a problem. So you play that and might go, Ok, you just shouldn't jump in a first person, it's rubbish. Well no, that's not what they're about, they're focused on a lot of other things and the things they have focused on is really fantastic, but that's really bad. But it doesn't have to be
Farrer: And they didn't have to make it work. We have to make it work. We sort of stuck our flag , how do you say, this is our thing. If we didn't make it work, we didn't have anything else. So that was sort of design through necessity. This was our big idea.

Are people going to follow suit?
O'Brien: I think so. Absolutely. Because I think like most good ideas, they're kind of obvious. Once you get it working, people go, well, yeah, why didn't we try that before? So I think other people will follow suit. Good, because I really believe it makes for a better experience.

Is it fair to say it's easy to get stuck, to get stuck in a particular frame of mind and stay there because it's easy? First-person shooters work pretty well, they're popular, why challenge ourselves too much to go beyond that? It's hard enough the way it is.

O'Brien: [pause] I think it's better to answer that by saying it's the direction we took rather than agreeing with that statement. That's kind of saying all other developers are lazy.

Oh yeah, no, but it's much more complicated than being lazy. Well, let's just say it's a difficult situation and leave it at that.

Farrer: Basically, we looked at first-person shooters, the first-person genre, which let's be honest, is first-person shooters, and we said, Ok, lots of people are focusing on weapons or armor or upgrades. There's this kind of first-person movement, but that's really small; there are a things that can be done to fix it, but don't go there, but we decided to go there. Everything else is being done, and well. I mean, I love first person games, there are a lot of good first-person games that are doing cool things. We just wanted to find something different and new.

Well, I hear you, obviously you just want to make the best game you can make. It's your vision, you just hope people can share it.

O'Brien: Yeah, absolutely. It's strange, because yes, we are trying to do something new, we are trying to give people a different perspective on action adventure games. It is new, it is different, that I'm happy to say.

The world I'm looking at. You can't discount how that looks too.

O'Brien: Yeah, we're really excited about the art style. And what I like about the art style is that it's not just a fanciful thing, it's born out of the core mechanic, the requirement of the mechanic, which was the ability to read the world quickly and navigate the world quickly. This is all brown and becomes hard to read, hard to see. The art style was driven from the core of the game. And the way the world is perceived is connected to the story as well. It really means something. It's more than just, let's make something pretty. Early on, we did have a more traditional, brown world. It really did start to get nauseating, it started to get disorienting. It was grittier, dirtier. It looked great, but we stood it, and we just weren't excited by it.

Farrer: It could have been any game.

If you can't excite yourself as an artist, a designer, what are you doing?

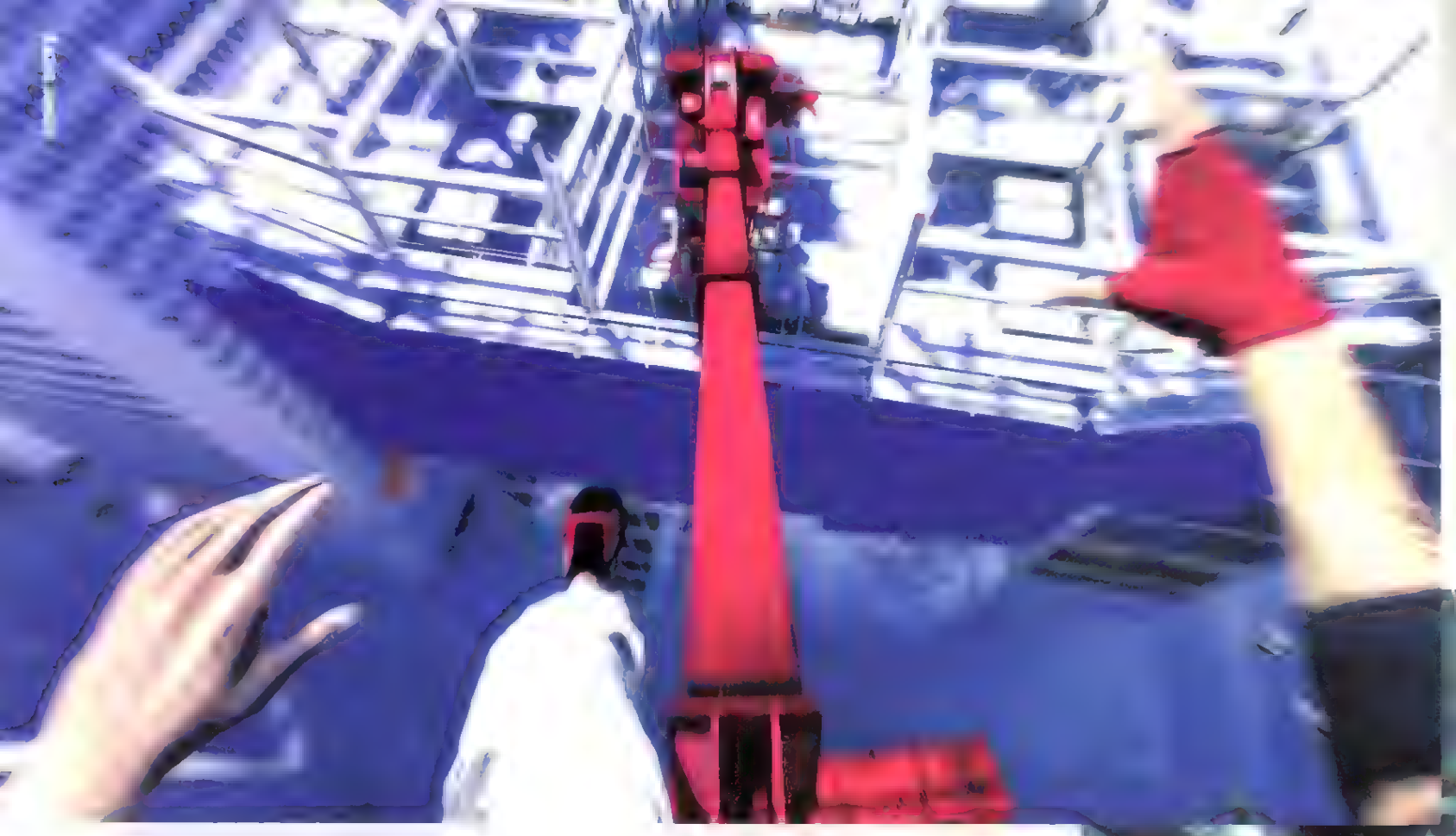
Farrer: I suppose when you're dealing with darker colors... there's sort of a heavy feeling to the world. When I walk out onto these rooftops, it's very bright, fresh and clean, it almost feels more active.

The heavy feeling can be a cheap emotion. But what type of emotion dominates Mirror's Edge?

O'Brien: In our game, I'm not sure it's an emotion per se. It's a visceral experience of being there, of being this character. I think the emotions you will experience depend on how you are playing the game. If you're getting shot at, it's fear. If you're running on the edge a lot or doing a lot of big jumps, it's an adrenaline rush. As the story progresses, we hope you will get caught up in that in a really important way as well.

O'Brien: And to develop a... being this character, developing a connection with a character that you can't get when you're looking at an avatar. You're in this person's body.

Where did Faith come from?



O'Brien: Like a lot of things in the world, we kind of stumbled across her. She was actually a concept we did for a different character we did in the game, but when we saw her... We originally had a male lead character, and she was supposed to be another runner in the world. And then our concept artist came up with this character, we saw her, and since I saw that image, I said, "That's our character. That represents our game more than anything else I've seen so far." Her look actually came from the world of the game. She's not overly complicated, she's not trying to be fashionable. She's got simple clothes, comfortable clothes, functional. The city itself is sort of her. She's sort of Eurasian, the city is a mixture of East and West. Some of the recent stuff, the signs are in Japanese and Chinese, it's sort of an amalgam of

different cities around the world.

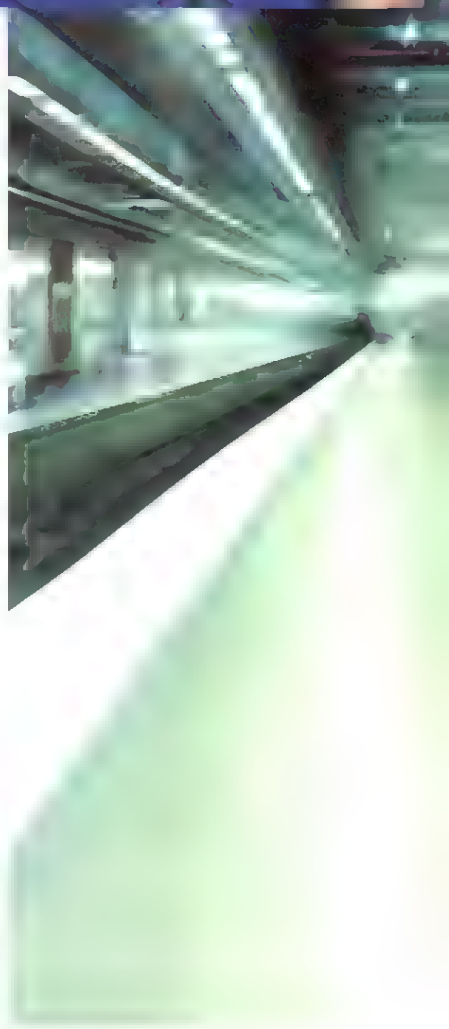
Farrer: If I can jump in, talk about how that eastern and western influence is born out of the design and structure of the game as well. You see things in a lot of different cities, New York has got these tall, big skyscrapers; there are those buildings you can stand on and run across and get that fantastic feeling. But they can be a harsh, grid structure, which can be quite restrictive if you want to design interesting, flowing areas. Something like Tokyo, doesn't have height, but it has these massive buildings and different heights all over the place. Putting all that together, putting the mechanic in there and putting Faith in there, it all starts falling into this world we built.

Did you ever toy with getting rid of a gun mechanic within that all together?

O'Brien: I think... it goes back to something you talked about earlier, what did we take from Battlefield? Actually what's been happing over the design of this game is we've been shedding off more and more of that Battlefield heritage. The step to take the gun away from Faith from the start of the game came reasonably late in the project, I think it's a sign of us just getting more and more competent in the actual core mechanic. If we were to design the game from scratch again, I think we would still have in the taking-the-weapons. It's fun, it's cool, it gives you the strategy that just running up and hitting people, as fun as that is, it doesn't give you; the strategy of, I got to take this guy out because he's got an LMG and I need that to take out these other guys. Not the guns per se, but the temporary powerup of the gun gives you an element of strategy we don't want to lose. So even if we were developing from scratch again, I think we would still have that in.

Farrer: Also, it's not necessarily about disarming an opponent, it's not necessarily about gaining a gun. There's some sort of wonderful pleasure in disarming an enemy and just dropping the gun. That act itself is pleasurable. You feel quite empowered by that—you know what, I don't need this.

And you make the choice. There's something empowering about that as well.



O'Brien. Yes, absolutely. . And that's very Jason Bourne. You see him take somebody on, break their arm, take the gun and just drop it.

How will you portray that violence in the game?
O'Brien: We're trying to avoid too much blood, that's not very much what the game is about. We're steering a narrow course there, it's a visceral game. So I think at the risk of repeating myself, but we're going back to the Bourne or the Bond mentality. What I like about Faith is that she feels like a very relevant hero these days. She's not about the biggest gun or armor or anything else. She's much more real, the action is up close and personal. That's the first-person again. So there is violence in the game. But it's not going to be gratuitous. We're not gonna have blood spurting out.

Where does Faith travel beyond the rooftops I'm seeing here?
Farrer: We don't go into caves or anything like that, we stay urban. That's what it's about. The city is a character as well.
O'Brien: But it's not all rooftops. You're in offices, you're in the streets, you're in subways, you're... well, we don't want to talk about it too much.

You're staying away from the mechanical, the nonhuman? It's not going into any heavy sci-fi?
O'Brien: It's absolutely not sci-fi. It's not something that's going to be like, and then there's this alien mother ship [laughs]!

[The discussion leads to the sensitivity of revealing too much of the fiction] So in general, what is Mirror's Edge?
O'Brien: It's this contemporary city, lots of influences. It's nowhere, but it's everywhere. It's a city that could exist or is starting to exist already. We're taking things that are happening in the world and bring them all to one place and slightly extrapolated them a little. Things like a lot of cities have so congestion charges, and we've looked at that, only the rich can afford vehicle permits and that sort of stuff. We've taken sort of the surveillance society that's growing, nanny states, and extrapolated that slightly. It's not a police state. It's not 1984. This is a nice place to live. It looks like a utopian society, but they've gained it by quite stringent laws, both environmental and on a personal level. Most people don't even realize it, but they are being closely controlled. One of the central concepts is freedom, and how much freedom are you willing to sacrifice for a comfortable life. For safe streets, clean streets, good schools, good healthcare. People all have this, but how they've done it is by pushing people who don't conform to the periphery of this glittering society, and that's the edge, that's the mirror's edge.

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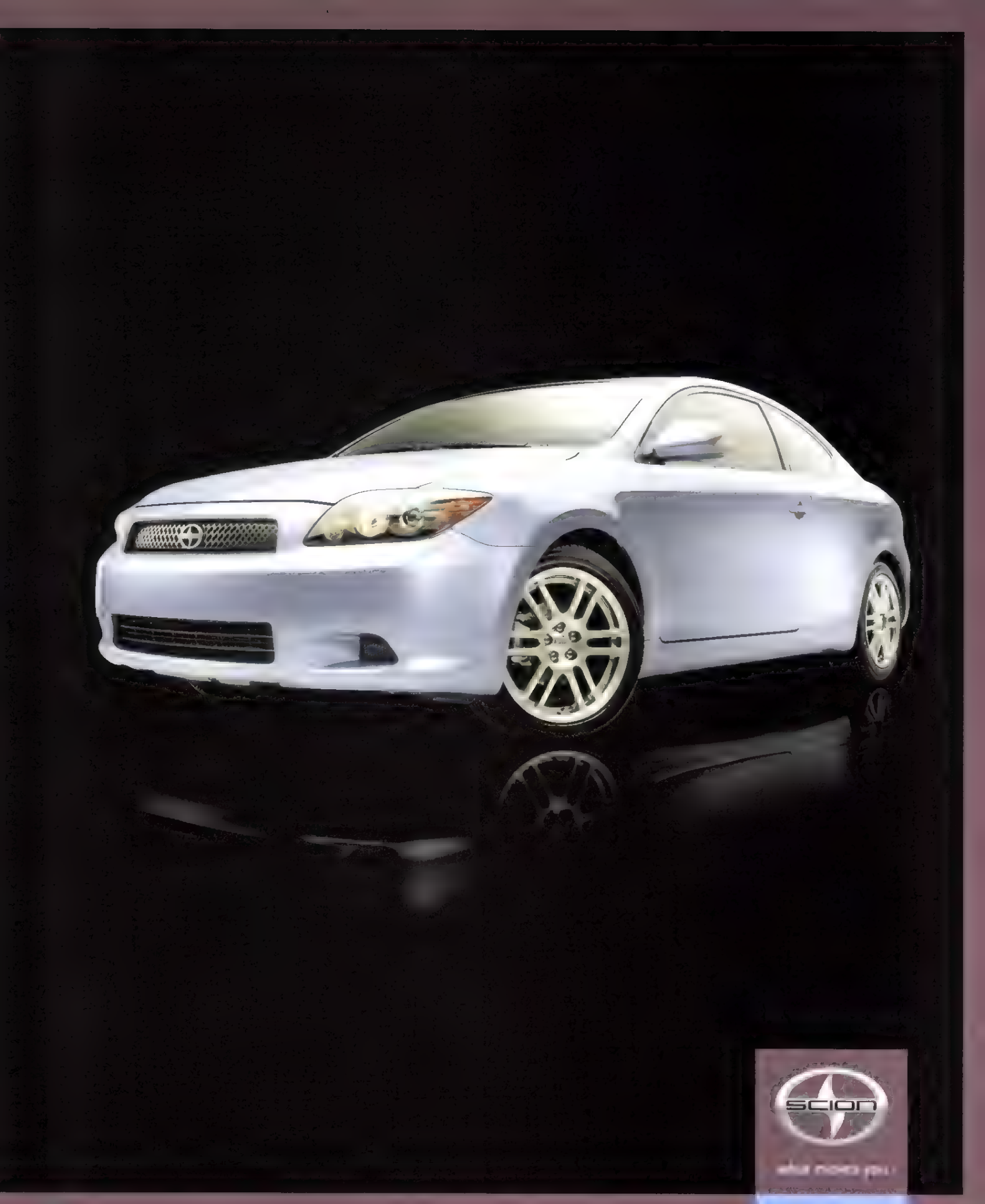
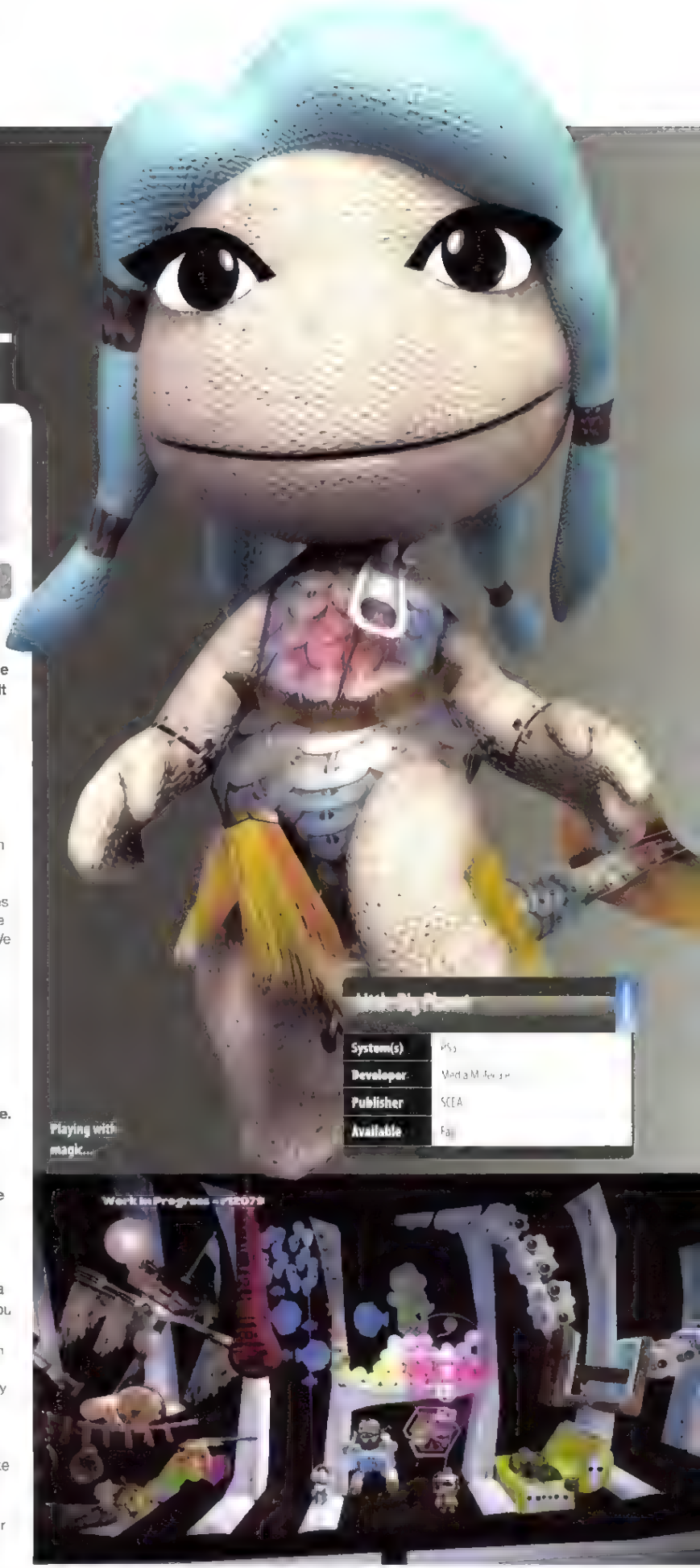

scion

Little Big Planet

It's time to go building...

words Brady Hechter



play: So I have to ask you a question I know you've never been asked before. Where did you get the shoes? Those are really great shoes.
Kyle Shubel [Laughs] Yeah, I gave up, I had the dress shoes on for the first two days and I had a blister this size on the back of my heel. So I was, screw it, I'm wearing the tennis shoes today

Ever since Little Big Planet was introduced, the development community has been really stoked on the idea. What do you attribute that internal respect to?
The team itself is so beyond creative. I mean, we all aspire to be creative, that's why we make video games. This team is so far off the reservation, I think everyone sees that and respects that immediately. And I mean, what would you call this? Honestly, it is creative gaming. It's creating a new genre It's like when Command and Conquer or Doom came out, it's like, what the heck is this? Real-time strategy? We didn't even know what that was. We haven't seen new genres come into games in 10 years, 11 years? So this really is something people respect from the standpoint of, Ok, you guys swung for the fence, it looks like you're gonna make it And that is one area where I think it's really garnering a lot of respect within the industry

You talk about the idea of genre. Genre is becoming more nebulous. The focus here, to create, you're in a little world, and you're set off to create. We talk about sandbox, it's a playground.
Yeah, that's a really good way of putting it This is not a sandbox, it's a playground. I gotta use that. [Laughs]

> "The Little Big Planet, it's almost like a child's imagination. Everything is larger than life.

I've already trademarked it. But yeah, I've overheard you talking about how difficult it is... Do you think it's difficult to get people to see what the game is actually about?
Yes, that's where we got to your very good question, what is the misunderstood part of this game Which I think is the breadth of what it really can be. And no one has an idea of where we're going to be a year from now. Three months after this game is out, what's gonna be on that world? What are people capable of doing? The team focuses on creativity, and they are amazingly so; we don't know what people are going to do. We completely expect you to look at our levels take some inspiration, and run

I hear you say that, and so often I hear developers exclaim, "Oh wow, I couldn't believe what I saw this guy doing, he got this gun and blew up that box, we just never anticipated that!" I see an exaggeration and earnestness for choice.
Yeah, this team really wants you to find ways to break the game

So you're trying to establish this in some important ways really 100 percent up to the player?
Yes We're giving you a clean slate We're giving you a bunch of canvas and a whole boatload of paint, and we're showing you a couple of pictures and saying, "What do you want to do?"
[As we observe the game the conversation turns to vehicles]
We've made a tank, a pirate ship, yesterday we made a double-decker bus Just screwing around and we started riding around in the environment. It's all physics based. You don't steer them or anything like that Although I did see one of the things the team has messed with, they made a vehicle with a couple of objects with a lever in between, and they put the one mobility

portion on the lever, by standing on top of the vehicle and pushing the lever forward, the wheel goes back and touches the rear and pushes the car forward. When they pulled it backwards, the lever pulled the motion wheel the other direction, and it then made the car go backwards. We never intended for you to drive vehicles, but, oh wait, you can figure out how.

So you sort of do something that breaks the level in sense, you just start over and try again?
Exactly. You can't publish something that is broken. You have to be able to complete a level, there has to be a beginning and an end before you can publish it.

So you're kind of playing the role of a little engineer?
Exactly. And another benefit on that front is, speaking of the try-over-and-over again and do something different, that's why you have multiple iterations on a given level. So I can say, I've got the basics down pretty good, I'm gonna save that. And now I'm gonna modify and try something a little different. Oops, that didn't work, so I'll go back to the save and start over. We've set it up for iterative response to your building.

Was this delightful visual style an effort from the start?
It's interesting, Alex [Evans] is the technical director at Media Molecule, and he wrote the, it's a proprietary physics engine. He wrote the physics engine from scratch. He also envisioned the way the textures were going to be. The Little Big Planet, it's almost like a child's imagination. Everything is larger than life. You'll see a tree, but it's not really a tree, it's made out of metal and it's rusty and it's got bolts for the way that the branches move. But you know it's a tree, it's just about, what would a child's creativity come up with? And that's really how the entire team thinks.

So you're really paying attention to the details and nuances of a growing fantasy. Just on the surface I sense something pretty different here.
Therein lies the... how do I demo this thing? You walk up and, you know, if I have a first-person shooter, I can tell you what it is in 30 seconds... But how do I even touch on this?

We're getting to a place where a lot of people talk about how they are making a game for everyone, the hardcore guy can get his fix or whatever, the casual new guy can jump in and have fun too. Is there some concern here, or rather, a concession that there is indeed a learning curve and appeal to a specific audience?
The primary focus is simplicity, that's what their end goal is. They want to make it as robust as possible, but the simple aspect must be there. So what they've done is, there have been level editors before. They're usually at one end of the spectrum or another. They're either incredibly difficult and you can make amazing levels but you have to have a coding degree. Or an art degree and know how to use Max. Or they're incredibly simple and I'm just placing a couple of items in a premade environment.

Their focus was to make something that was closer to the simple level and then make it as robust as possible, fill in that gap. Everyone must be able to use the tools.

All the talk of the physics, how removed are they from an accurate real-world base?
It's physics-plus. Everything is just a little exaggerated, the character's got a little too much momentum. He's kind of like a kid, like a three-year-old. He can move and run but he's a little bit clumsy. He bounces off things a lot, he falls over, you're gonna get knocked off things, run, skid far off. It's intentional to some degree to have this physics plus. It's still something you can wrap your mind around.

Is this mostly conditioned to be played online? Can people who want to dig into it on their own find something robust?
There is a Little Big story. There is a continuity through the game. The levels the developers are going to provide will carry you through a path. In the single-player game, every level can be beaten alone. Not every object can be gained alone. Many things require cooperation. So you're either gonna have to go online or bring people to your house then work together to, say, use the seesaw to launch somebody up higher to a place I couldn't get to myself. So the intent is, I can buy this game, I'm a fisherman, I'm on a boat, I don't have an internet connection, I can buy this game and play all the levels. And I'll be able to create levels and not once go online.

Did you say there will six, seven distinct areas?
Oh no, there will be as many as we can fit?

You're just going till you ship?
Till we ship. At this point in time, the tool set is there. It's about making online palatable, easy to use, making it what we want it to be, and fit in as much content as we can.

You go to India, you can grab some objects from there, head over to England, and transplant into that area?
For the levels you are creating, yes. You won't be able to modify the developers' levels.

What I'm seeing right now?
This is Indian Spice. I don't know how much you've seen this yet, the facial animation and emotion system. [Runs through a gamut of emotions; the animations are wonderful] Here's driving in LA with fists... This is me before I went onstage yesterday [that is unmistakably stage fright]

The creator is in the creation here, eh? Does he have a name?
Sackboy

Is Sackboy the central character?
He is going to be the central character, but we are sex-agnostic. For the ladies out here, you can make a sack girl very easily.

He does look like a Sackboy.
Yeah, the team decided Sackboy was appropriate.

There's a currency to the game, when you're going through and collecting to buy parts?
You will not be able to go into the game and immediately build a level. We want you to play a bit and understand the mechanics.

You know you're gonna have people within the development community playing this and putting their stuff on.
We're already talking to several teams. You can actually have specific ones with the teams and release them as, this is the level from the "insert team here."

Brian Hastings from Insomniac, I think he's commented how he loves this thing.
Yeah, Brian and I have talked on several occasions about the potential.

I'm just not someone who gets excited for online play that much, but this does excite me...
Do you go to Youtube?

Sure.
Therefor you can play this game.

Which brings me to something I was kind of wondering as I see more of the game, so many games involve going and killing people... This is in some ways a departure from a lot of what's out there. It's not a Halo or Call of Duty or what tends to get the big accolades, to me that's cool. The surreal nature of it kind of goes back to more what games used to be.
There's a lot of our roots in this game. A lot of garage, basement dev teams, three guys who worked hard to kick out Bard's Tale. The seven-man team that made Descent.

Yeah, you kind of sense that. Maybe that's part of why, going back to the original question, why the development community seems excited about it, they see a joy going into it.
It's sad that we're such a young community, only about 27, 28 years old really, I mean you can go back to the '70s, but as an industry, we're 27, 28 years old, we're already jaded. We're already looking back to our roots. But this really does make me feel like 1983. This is just that kind of mentality.

"So this really is something people respect from the standpoint of, Ok, you guys swung for the fence, it looks like you're gonna make it."

This little guy lost his ball, but fortunately platforms will help him find it.

Mana Khemia: Alchemists of Al-Revis

Back to school

Words Heather Campbell

Harry Potter and Fullmetal Alchemist sure have had an effect on the otaku world. If you're looking to get a fix of anime-styled magical school action, there seems to be a new title released about every three months. Which is great. Personally, I really dig the idea of going back to school someday to study dragons or alchemy. Or talking kittens. That's why these series are so popular, after all.

Mana Khemia is a sweet and delicate RPG, with a focus on character-building, relationships, and item collection. A sort of spin-off of the Atelier Iris series, this cute title features sprites on an isometric background...a look that really works for the Gust crew. You play as Vayne, a young boy with amnesia and a gift for magical alchemy. Vayne lives in the forest with his familiar (here called a Mana), which is a talking cat named Sulpher. Vayne is recruited to the Al-Revis Academy, and immediately teams up with the cute girl who confuses his detachment for romantic secrecy. Someone should make a game where this doesn't happen. I don't care what universe you belong to; aloof weirdoes don't get the girl until they've become CEOs.

Soon, Vayne is entrenched in the day-to-day affairs of the Academy, which include taking classes and venturing out into the wild to collect materials for alchemy projects. Classes end in an exam, and passing the exam requires crafting an object out of the materials you've purchased or picked up from monsters. Vayne's small party can perform magical combos in a relatively fast-paced battle system, but most of the action takes place on campus.

NIS is determined to bring these niche titles to the PS2 even after the system has been overshadowed by its big, important brother...which is lucky for us, since everyone seems to own a PS2. Now that we've gotten our Grand Theft Autos out of the system, it's time to do some school simulation.

System(s)	Ps2
Developer	Gust
Publisher	NIS
Available	March 18

"Vayne is recruited to the Al-Revis Academy, and immediately teams up with the cute girl who confuses his detachment for romantic secrecy."

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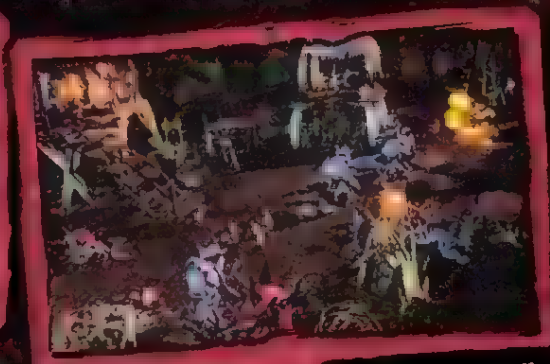

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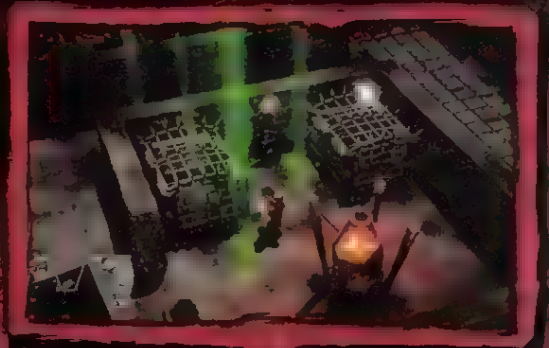

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Soul Calibur 4

words Brady Fiechter

sten, there was a time when someone once thought peanut butter, chocolate, are you kidding me? But as we have all experienced this combination and realized the delicious results, there is no reason Darth Vader and Yoda will not be equally well matched as combatants in Soul Calibur IV.

For everyone who feels that Star Wars and Soul Calibur are galaxies so far, far away that their mating is blasphemous, I remind you that Vader (exclusive to PS3) and Yoda (exclusive to Xbox 360) seem to have no direct involvement in your sacred Soul Calibur backstory and neither one will exist on the initial path of the single-player campaign. Lighten up. Lightsabers are badass, and their inclusion in Soul Calibur IV will be a fun diversion as long as all the balanced pieces are in place online.

If you really want to talk absurdities, take a look at Taki's gargantuan, strangely comical bouncing breasts. Getting too worked up over this before the game's development cycle is complete needs to wait—the games essentially at the halfway point. But as it stands, Taki, one of my favorite characters in the series, looks like a grotesque alien version of a real doll for mad-scientist plastic surgeons. Just plain weird, folks.

She looks ridiculous, but man does she feel as good as ever in the few rounds I clashed with Cassandra and Mitsurugi, the only other playable characters on display

> "Lightsabers are badass, and their inclusion in Soul Calibur 4 will be a fun diversion..."

as Soul Calibur IV was revealed in playable form. One detail that really stood out was the muscle tension and intricately sculpted physiques the characters maintained, moving with a fluidity that translated through typically great control.

Joining the limited fighter roster were two single-plane arenas that will hopefully speak to the tone of the final game. The setting sun in the congo-like setting cast a gorgeous, color-rich light over the battle, hinting at an art style that might pull away from the frothy medieval fantasy of Soul Calibur III. Project Soul knows their last effort left some fans disappointed; there's a lot left to reveal in Soul Calibur IV.

System(s)	[illegible]
Developer	[illegible]
Publisher	Namco Bandai
Available	TBA

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Condemned 2 Bloodshot

There will be blood

words Dave Halverson

It's been twelve months have passed since the events surrounding Condemned: Criminal Origins. Twelve months of agony for FBI Special Crimes Investigator Ethan Thomas as he wanders aimlessly through the dark city fighting back his inner demons with alcohol. A local policeman, along with Ethan's confidant, Malcolm Vanhorn, have gone missing in the area, so the police reluctantly recruit Ethan to assist in the investigation.

Metro City hasn't changed much since the last time we visited; if anything it's gotten worse. Everywhere you look there's rot and decay—hollowed-out buildings full of meth labs and drug-addled maniacs... But it's old hat to Ethan making him the ultimate protagonist for a mental mind-f**k of a video game that makes the original look tame by comparison.

The game begins in an altogether disturbing manner. As Ethan begins tracking Vanhorn the city around him appears to be covered in a thick layer of tar-like sludge from which withered corpses seep from the walls. Together with the usual array of seething drug-crazed killers (only with black tar seeping from every orifice), it's a fine place to introduce the game's new fighting mechanics. Ethan can now parry, throw combos, and initiate chain attacks, where following a series of HUD prompts results in a bevy of lethal blows. Try not to kill 'em though, once an opponent is dazed, you can ram their head into the nearest skull marker to initiate a context-sensitive death scene. I never imagined there were so many ways to crush a person's skull. Monolith is like the Martha Stewart of murder. My favorite so far is the good ol' crush-the-head-in-a-toilet scene. You just can't beat a good toilet-seat thrashing. You can also use toilet seats as a weapon or to hurl at an enemy. Chucking stuff is another handy tactic in Ethan's repertoire.

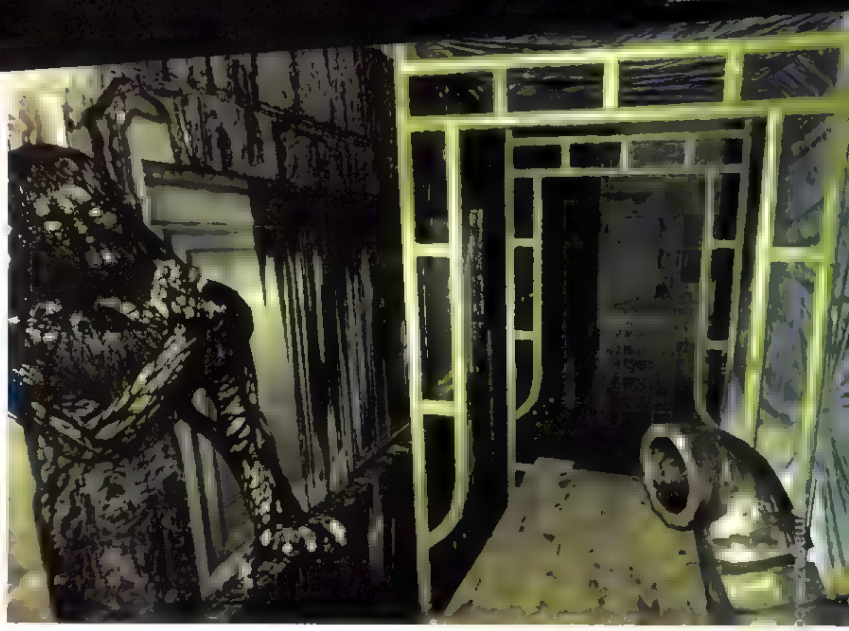
"This is a seriously disturbing game—so much so that extended play takes its toll."

Ceiling sinks hold gruesome surprises.

View to a context sensitive kill.

Part of what made the Cr m na Origins so extraord nary was the forens cs invest gations, and so Mono th has added layers here too integrating more detect ve work into each crime scene for Rosa to ana yze and interpret. Pay attention, because you w l be tested later Ethan's phys cal ty s also ratcheted up jump ng, fa ing travers ng ledges, duck ng under obstac es and so on are a u tra-rea st c You really get the sense that you're looking through Ethan s eyes r ght down to h s fu -b own a coho sm Aim ng h s gun, he has a bad case of the shakes, so say he o to chugging booze as a p ay mechanic Ah, the pause that refreshes N ce 'n steady

Everyth ng about B oodshot s authentic, and Mono th pu ls no punches This is a ser ous y disturbing game—so much so that extended play takes its tol t's eas, to see why Warner Bros s making Condemned nto a film: t has everyth ng a great physiolog ca thr ler needs I'm going to enjoy watching it ..but not nearly as much as I am playing it



Star Wars: The Force Unleashed

words Greg Orlando

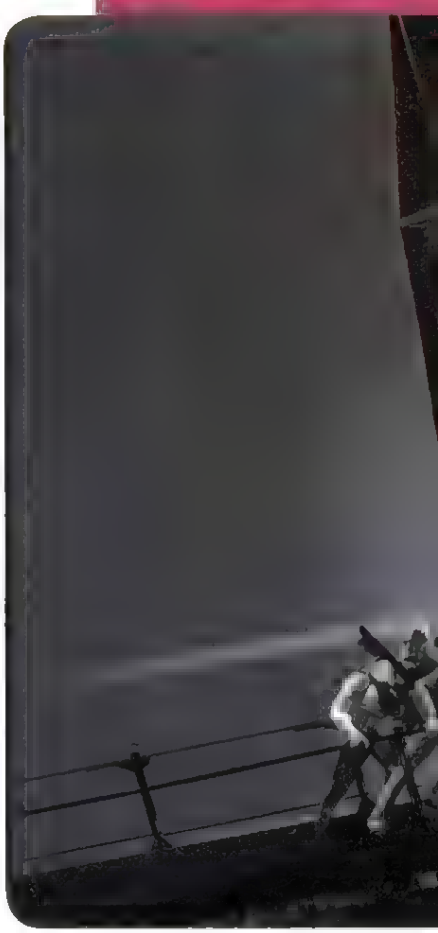
Rest assured, Darth Vader's secret apprentice in the third-person adventure Star Wars: The Force Unleashed will not be using his supernatural abilities to rescue kittens, save the environment, or promote good dental hygiene. He's more of a slash-and-burn man, the type of guy who would go out of his way to use his Force powers to lift the tree from its roots, hurling it and the kitten directly at some poor soul's face to muck up his dental work—while simultaneously devising a nefarious scheme to ruin the environment.

Force Unleashed, which will see release on all next-generation consoles, PlayStation 2, and handhelds, may well be unlike anything LucasArts has produced so far. Yes, it's firmly grounded in the Star Wars universe, but its protagonist is, to put it mildly, villainous. The apprentice, under the direction of Darth Vader, wields dark Force powers and must seek out Jedi Knights to destroy them. Other video games from the Star Wars franchise allowed players to take the role of characters with misplaced allegiances, such as the former Galactic Empire operative Kyle Katarn in Star Wars: Dark Forces, or battle as villains Darth Vader and Boba Fett (in the lamentable fighting game Star Wars: The Masters of Teräs Käsi), but none have outright featured a bad guy as the central character.

Further, the game is being powered by two intriguing licensed technologies in Digital Molecular Matter (DMM) and Euphoria. Both allow for wonderful gameplay options and effects. Digital Molecular Matter ensures objects in the game world react as they would in real life, and Euphoria imbues the game's characters with a functional central nervous system and sense of self-preservation. This means, say, that when Darth Vader's apprentice uses his Force powers to lash out at a metal door, the structure will first bend, then buckle, and finally shatter. It also ensures that a foe being held in the air by Force powers and ignominiously impaled by a lightsaber may well attempt to pull the sword from his belly before shuffling off to Deadsville.

The plan here is to walk the road less traveled, and LucasArts will not just be doing this with Unleashed's protagonist and its technologies, but also with its setting and subject matter. Unleashed takes place between the events of Star Wars: Revenge of the Sith and Star Wars: A New Hope, a time period the game's Project Lead Hayden Blackman suggests is completely untapped and, thus, the most fertile ground available. The game will feature appearances, then, from Star Wars characters in the prequel films as well as the original trilogy.

The game's title hints at big things for the oftentimes bandied about, but barely explored notion of the Force. "When we were working on the game from early concept standpoint, we knew we wanted to re-envision or re-imagine the Force," Blackman says. "[It's] This very primal, over-the-top, amped-up energy that you get to



Use the force and things will blow up.

w e.d in the game

In short, asses aplenty will be k cked

Scratch one TIE Fighter ...

The game's tutorial stage drops players nto a TIE F ghter factory. A Jedi genera is attack ng the facil ty, and the Apprentice will have to battle both a series of Stormtroopers as wel as a host of Rebe forces to get at h m. "You're Darth Vader's secret apprentice," Blackman says. "[Vader is] k nd of grooming you to help him take on the Emperor one day He wants to make sure nobody finds out who you are, or knows that you exist so he's told you when you go to th s Imperia facil ty to fight these early Rebels to make sure you wipe out a w tnesses It g ves the player the freedom to attack pretty much anyone he wants "

t's here p ayers will be ntroduced to the basic mechanics of the game: Force powers, ightsaber attacks, and env ronment manipulation. As wise Jed master Yoda once said, "Size matters not " It's possib e for the Apprentice to grab a huge, grounded TIE Fighter with his Force powers and topp e the craft onto a series of oncoming enemies. When a huge metal door s ams shut, seemingly trapping the Apprent ce, he can use the exp os ve Force push ability to buck e the doors, or simply grab a Stormtrooper and hurl the fla ng enemy into the door with such force ts metal will dent

Th s, again, is Digital Molecular Matter at work, and t's created some interest ng challenges for LucasArts. Blackman says "When we took this [TIE Fighter Factory] leve out to focus testing—we do a lot of focus test ng here at LucasArts—the people got turned around in this area when the doors c osed They weren t sure where to go When we asked them why they d'dn't Force Push anything and their feedback was, 'Well you've never been ab e to do that n a game before '

f you walk up to a door in a game and it doesn t open t means you're not supposed to go that way," he says "Here, we're giving you the chance to interact w th the env ronment and pretty much go anywhere Doors won't stop you at all in this game."

Very little, in fact, will be able to stop the Apprentice. In addition to his Force powers, the Jedi w ll carry a red lightsaber he can use in a variety of ways When not attack ng, he ho ds the ightsaber behind h s back with the blade vertically aligned and fac ng upward, seemingly in a gesture of defiance When he brings t out in front of his body..

LucasArts is treating the ightsaber as a Force power unto itself, Blackman says A pacing mechanic has been added for

"Yes, it's firmly grounded in the Star Wars universe, but its protagonist is, to put it mildly, villainous."

5 things you absolutely must know about the game

Haden Blackman, project lead for Star Wars: The Force Unleashed, is perhaps the most well-organized game designer around. When he introduces Unleashed, he states there are five things everyone must know about the game. They are also all the keys to a fully unleashed Force.

First: What's the vision for the Force?
LucasArts has defined the Force as "a primal, over-the-top, limitless energy that you get to wield in the game," Blackman says.

Second: What's the one big thing in Unleashed, the element of the game that has to hold up and be fun throughout?
"Kicking ass with the Force," Blackman says. "Everything we've done in the last two years is about making sure that the Force powers and the way you use them are fun."

Third: Who do you play in the game?
Players take the role of Darth Vader's secret apprentice.

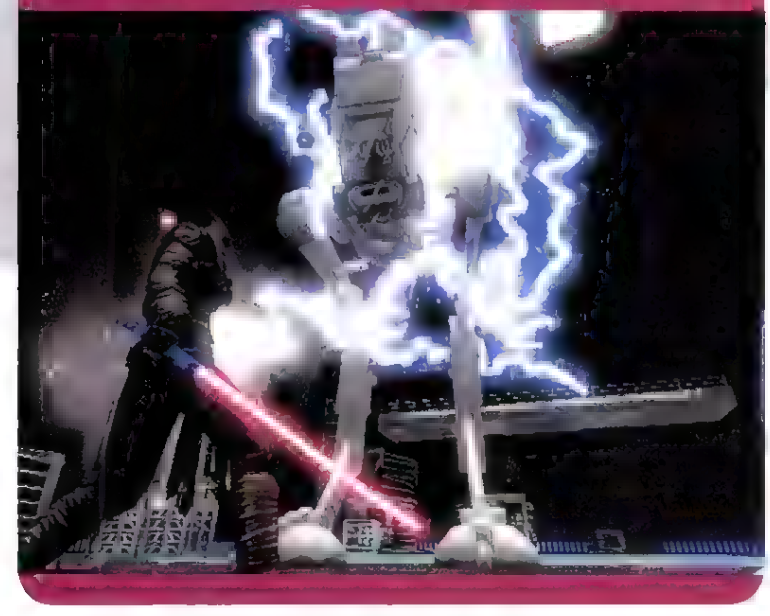
Fourth: When does the game take place?
The Force Unleashed occurs between the events of Star Wars: Episode III: Revenge of the Sith and the original trilogy.

Fifth: What's the theme of the story?
Redemption. The apprentice begins the game as a villain, but may not end up that way. Blackman promises many plot twists and turns as the game progresses.

"In a game so laden with action, it's easy to lose track of things such as plot and character. FU, at its heart, holds a theme of redemption."

Wii Force Lightsabers

Each of the versions of Star Wars: The Force Unleashed featured unique content. For the Wii version, players will able to use the Wii remote to make lightsaber attacks with five separate movements being recognized for different attacks. There's also some Wii-exclusive stages set in the Jedi temple on Coruscant, as well as a special duel mode allowing players to choose from a pool of 20 Star Wars characters (among them Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader) and compete in frantic lightsaber battles against their friends.



blade-based attacks, and it's much like the one Peter Molyneux has whipped up for the role-playing game Fable 2. Quick button presses enable fast, low-powered strikes and slower taps provide for elaborate maneuvers that do a lot of damage. These strikes can be strung together in different ways to create combinations.

Moreover, players can use lightsaber attacks in conjunction with their other Force powers to create other combinations. "You can do a couple of saber attacks followed by a [Force] push. Bam! To send the guys flying," Blackman says, as a fellow LucasArts employee pulls off that very trick. "He just hit a home run," he says as a stricken Stormtrooper goes flying.

"Then we also have Force power combos," he says. "If you follow up a push with lightning it does something very different than if you do lightning followed by push."

Experimentation with these combinations pays off some nice dividends. Players are awarded points for each combination and for using the environment creatively. Points can then be used to buy new Force powers and upgrades to combinations and the Apprentice's abilities. Players can also celebrate their greatest hits with a replay camera that activates automatically, or that can be triggered manually with a press of the game controller's D-pad.

Junk in the trunk...

On the yellow-and-brown garbage planet Raxus Prime, a series of magnetic lanes carry junk overhead. It's a limitless source of ammunition for an angry Jedi. Kasdan, an alien Jedi creating a droid army, waits on Raxus Prime. His specialty is cobbling golems from junk, and he hurls them at the Apprentice at every turn. Players can counter by pulling junk down from the magnetic lanes and either tossing it at foes, or using it in a more creative fashion. Superconductors, for example, will amplify Force lightning, sending out powerful sparks to incinerate nearby targets. Engine turbines become explosive rockets if hit with lightning.

On Raxus, players will be able to see the detritus from the Star Wars universe. The Apprentice fights on top of a junked Star Destroyer and off in the distance, Blackman points out there's a YT-1300 Corellian Cruiser—the same model as Han Solo's Millennium Falcon—sitting atop a pile of junk. It's fitting, too, that the Apprentice's costume for this world is a collection of tattered rags, although players are free to select any costume worn by the Apprentice on any previous level, or any of the outfits they've acquired by collecting special Jedi holocrons.

Rancorous...

Felucia is the final stop on the tour. It's a plant-laden world that was seen briefly in Star Wars: Revenge of the Sith. This verdant world plays host to a series of bulbous and rubbery mushroom-like things, as well as a host of Force-sensitive natives.

The Apprentice is hunting down the female Jedi Shaak Ti who was seen in both Star Wars: The Clone Wars and Star Wars: Revenge of the Sith. Oddly enough, Ti was killed in two separate deleted Revenge of the Sith scenes, but the game supposes she survived and took refuge on Felucia. This is the Apprentice's final test, and it plays out as a two-stage battle near the mouth of a giant Sarlacc.

"Shaak Ti has a number of powers at her disposal," Blackman says. "She's got the ability to summon a wave of Force energy, she can stab the ground and can cause a Sarlacc attack to come after you, she's very evasive, and she can also summon in some Felucian warriors to fight you." In addition to Ti and her minions, the Apprentice brawls with a series of exploding acid pustules that act as landmines. To top it all off, the epic battle concludes in the mouth of the Sarlacc itself.

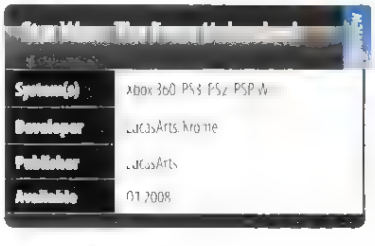
As a warm-up, players get to fight a giant Rancor, with long-range attacks being a surprisingly smart strategy. Ingenious use of the Force allows the Apprentice to strike a foe with lightning and, while the electricity is still arcing through the target's body, pick him up and hurl him into the Rancor. Players will also be rewarded for completing in-game quicktime events (as seen in the Dreamcast adventure Shenmue), to complete exaggerated finishing moves. Failure here, Blackman says, will not be punished, save for the fact that players won't get to see something really cool, such as the Apprentice's lightsaber carving a huge wound on the side of the Rancor's ugly mug.

Everything that rises must converge...

In a game so laden with action, it's easy to lose track of things such as plot and character. Force Unleashed, at its heart, holds a theme of redemption.

Blackman says, "We do set up how you became Darth Vader's apprentice, and hopefully people will have a little bit of empathy toward the character once they realize that. From a writing perspective we needed to have a character that was believable as Darth Vader's apprentice, and was going off and serving Vader, but also someone who was likeable, somebody you wanted to be and, hopefully, wanted to hang out with."

A droid sidekick named Proxy will help to humanize the Apprentice, and there will be a love interest in the Imperial pilot Juno Eclipse. This woman acts as a sounding board for the Apprentice and, again, someone who can flx him more as a three-dimensional character. "The story does go through many twists and turns," Blackman says. "While you start as Darth Vader's secret Apprentice, that doesn't necessarily mean that's where you'll end up."

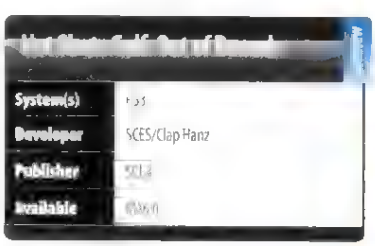


Hot Shots Golf: Out of Bounds

Nothing is out of bounds

Ah the anatomy of a next-gen golf game. You may ask yourself, how will the game of video game golf benefit from new technology? I know I did. And Hot Shots—what is it, 5 now?—has the answer: size matters. The ability to render such vast wilderness—mowed down and groomed so that grown men and women can hit a ball into a cup—has solved two of video game golfing's problems: boundaries and distance. So huge are these "holes" that you can drive onto an adjacent fairway as a shortcut to *your* green. That's big baby. The distance to the hole is also longer, giving the game a more open feel. Of course it's as pretty as it can be. This one is detailed down to individual blades of grass and the texture on the ball from three inches away. Water hazards, trees, bridges, brooks...man is it pretty. Even the customizable player's sneakers are normal mapped. And you can do *anything* with the camera. You can fiddle about with the landscape between strokes until the cute little cows come home. The game remains super-deformed (squat cuteness) in all of its splendor—HS has always been the best looking game of golf, and Clap Hanz and Sony Computer's Santa Monica Studios have tacked on an additional stroke and putt technique—a three-point swing where the animation is your guide over a gauge (gauges are for pussies now, didn't you get the memo?). This works extremely well driving but makes putting an exercise in guesswork. There's a slight pause after you press the button that always seems to send the ball hurling. Perhaps this has yet to be addressed. I also really dig the caddies in Out of Bounds. They really get into it and chase the ball down each time you hit it like a border runner on a case of Red Bull. There's also a major online component and a myriad of customizations at your fingertips. I'd say "forrrre!" here but then you'd probably hurl this issue into the fireplace.

Golfers call that a rough shot.



"I'd say "forrrre!" here but then you'd probably hurl this issue into the fireplace."

Lego Indiana Jones: The Original Adventures

Whip it good...

words Greg Orlando

Indiana Jones is a snake-hating, fedora-wearing, Nazi-punching, artifact-collecting man. And now the famed archaeologist from the Raiders of the Lost Ark series can add blockhead to his resume.

There's something wonderfully goofy about a tiny, almost boxlike Indiana Jones fleeing from a boulder made entirely of Lego pieces. This is exactly what game fans can expect when LucasArts and Traveller's Tales ship Lego Indiana Jones: The Original Trilogy in June – and then some.

The formula is instantly recognizable. Drop cute, blocky, toylike renderings of action heroes and their nemeses (it worked for the Star Wars folk, and it's soon to be re-created with Batman) into a destructible world where objects spout shiny doodads when they get wrecked. Add platforming, some puzzles, gunplay, and fisticuffs and everything old instantly becomes new again.

For the record, Lego Indiana Jones: The Original Adventures will not mark the action hero's debut in the Lego world. The character first appeared as an unlockable bonus in last year's Lego Star Wars: The Complete Saga. Original Adventures does mark his first starring role in a Lego-themed video game, and the first Indiana Jones video game since 2003.

Original Adventures plays out through the entirety of the Raiders of the Lost Ark Trilogy, with one notable exception. LucasArts has opted to replace the Nazis in

"There's something wonderfully goofy about a tiny, almost boxlike Indiana Jones fleeing from a boulder made entirely of Lego pieces..."

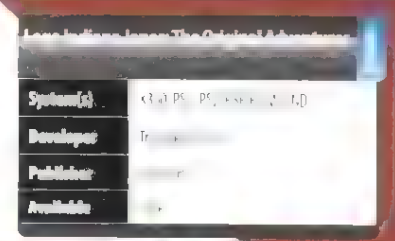
the first and third films with generic German enemies. This is largely because the Lego series of games are intended for young audiences, and LucasArts strictly speaking is remaining historically accurate if not wholly in concordance with the Indiana Jones films – or even the truth.

Indiana Jones' first challenge in his new game involves retrieving the lost idol of the Hovitos, and it was this portion of the game LucasArts chose to highlight on a rainy December morning. Here, Indiana and his native guide Satipo must investigate a cave, retrieve the idol, and escape from a massive boulder.

It's easier said than done, but Indiana Jones does have his trusty whip, a tool he can use to not only righteously smite his enemies, but also disarm them. The whip can also be employed on branches to allow our hero to swing across chasms and – of course – to activate the game's many switches. He'll also be accompanied on every mission with a second character, and will oftentimes need to work in conjunction with his ally to solve puzzles.

Players can expect 60 playable characters as Indiana Jones progresses from Raiders of the Lost Ark to Temple of Doom and finally to The Last Crusade. Among Indiana's sidekicks are the Asian youth Short Round, Satipo, Indiana Jones' father, and Marcus Brody. It will also be possible to unlock and play as the game's enemies, such as the villainous Mola Ram from Indiana Jones and The Temple of Doom. Each of the characters will have specific abilities that can be used during play. Satipo, for example, can dig for buried goodies and Indiana's female accomplice Marion Ravenwood can access – no pun intended – monkeys.

This particular treasure will be unearthed in June.



Battlefield
Bad Company

In destruction we trust

They say you can tell a lot about a person by the company he keeps. Well, rookie soldier Preston Marlowe keeps the worst company of all. B Company. Or, more commonly, Bad Company.

Bad company is a penal battalion of sorts. Its loudmouthed machine gunner hacked into U.S. Army computers. The gruff, African-American Sergeant is only there because assignment into Bad Company means a reduced stint with the army. And Preston? Well, it's best not to ask. Suffice it to say the four-man Bad Company does the jobs the rest of the army doesn't want to do.

Bad Company may seem, initially, like every other vaguely futuristic first-person shooter, but developer DICE has seemingly tinkered with the formula to create something interesting if not genuinely special. First and foremost, the characters are all genuinely three-dimensional and likeable. The demolitions expert in the squad greets Preston with, "You smell very clean!" Later, the bigmouthed Sweetwater laments Preston's apparent death by quipping he was just about to learn the new guy's name.

With the characters firmly established, DICE could have just told a straightforward tale of heroism as the members of Bad Company redeem themselves against the Russian enemy on a series of European battlefield. Instead, the developers opted to tell an entirely different story, one that's wholly intriguing.

Bad Company lives up to its name in a really big way. Shortly after the initial missions, Bad Company opts to go AWOL, hunting after a fortune in gold. How this plays out, of course, is a wonderful surprise that will not, certainly, be spoiled here. It is enough to say humanity as a whole has had enough straightforward, by-the-numbers first-person shooter war games to last two lifetimes.

Extremely destructible environments—code for stuff blows up real good—allow players to get creative with their fighting. Enemies crouched behind fences might be invulnerable to gunfire in lesser titles, but Bad Company makes it possible for Preston to flip up a scope on his gun and turn it into a grenade launcher. Hurled grenades are great for blowing up fences—and the idiot soldiers hiding behind them. It's also possible to blow holes in houses, allowing Bad Company soldiers to flank soldiers hidden within them, or to create good sniping points.

Bad Company will have the requisite online multiplayer modes, supporting 24 players. But it may just be the its engaging single player adventure that serves as the game's great draw.

Who said war was hell?

System(s)	PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Developer	DICE
Publisher	EA
Available	March

Dark Sector

Heads will roll

It's well advised to stay away from this one

words Brady Fiechter

ark Sector is in the final stretch of development but that's not about to stop director Steve Sinclair from taking a few of my quick questions about his bloody third-person action adventure

System(s)	Xbox
Developer	Digital Extremes
Publisher	D
Available	Apr

INTERVIEW Director Steve Sinclair

Your producer told a funny story about Sony wondering why the game had to be so violent. Because that's what gamers want. I guess I'm one of those guys sometimes. What is it about us kind of gamers? You know, that's the tone you're taking, it's pretty intense.
Steve Sinclair: It is brutal, it's dark, it's pretty grim. What is that? I don't know. I guess you'd have to ask a psychologist for the answer. It's touching the animal, the dark part of your soul. Why do people listen to sad songs? Is it cathartic? I'm not sure. It seems to be important.

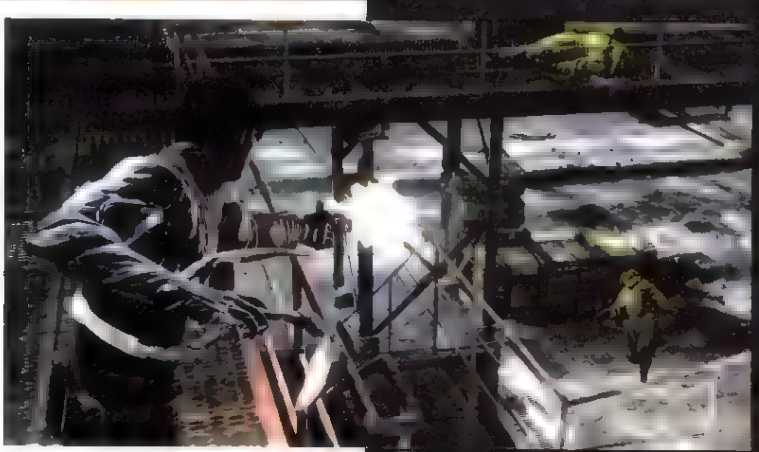
You've got this, he almost seems like an antihero in a way, he's just running, I guess trying to save himself amidst all this madness.
Yeah, what is he trying to do? One of the things that was interesting about that, was you know, one of the first story drafts we had, everyone keeps saying, he has to find a cure for this. He's turning into a monster. The problem with that is that you have this dissonance with what the player wants. Which is a violent power fantasy. Do you want to not have superpowers? Even as evil as they are. So we started to shy away from that, Haden starts to embrace himself more in a way. As the plot winds thicker and thicker toward the end, he becomes more in control of himself.

> "Currently we are looking into a line of life-size armor replicas and high-end large-scale display figures."

The game began as much heavier science fiction. Did you transfer to this more relatable reality to bring the player closer to the character?
Absolutely, totally got it. Trying to add some familiar elements into it, if we're trying to deepen our consumer base... that sounds businessee. But I mean, if you're gonna try to deepen your experience, those touchstones of what you're familiar with, what is real, are an important way of introducing you to something new.

I was just reading an article about the growing relevance of what a player feels in a game, the emotion, and I really think the world and how you are brought into it really touches on how you relate to it for a lot of people.
Yeah, and contrast that with the character involvement you might, well, that I felt, from Zelda Windwaker, which is highly abstract and in some way timeless because of it. You can still do that, but I think a lot of people, using that example to continue, it threw a lot of people off. Honestly, there's a huge pressure when you shift to the next platform that graphic realism is the ultimate prime directive, so those real environments and that realistic look is what people are expecting, so you're drawn to that when you're designing for it.

What is Dark Sector's calling card, it's strongest suit?
The glaive. That standard weapon. We really wanted to—I guess speaking with the flavor we've set here, talking about fantasy and the familiar—we wanted to try to make something that people can buy into without really having to set aside their disbelief too hard. We wanted to make something that was an actionee superhero game, and we wanted to use our experience with shooters and the game design template that brings with it, put it in the third person and then have: what is really going to be our different thing? That ended up being the glaive. And that also was the thing that oddly enough became the hub of the tone of the game. When the tool that your hero is using, your expectation is so destructive, that turns the character and the story and the world into a much more grim, barbaric place. I remember when we did a focus test early on in the game, it was shite, but we did this focus test, and people said, it's huge and it's metal, I expect to chop the guy in half and see his breakfast. We laughed about that, it was so grim and so tasteless. But we laughed and kind of agreed, that's your expectation when you see that. As soon as we really saw that, that's the distinction, that changed the way the game proceeded.



Tales of Vesperia

Japan's most popular non-Square Enix RPG series comes to Xbox 360

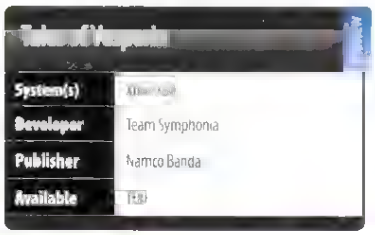
words Nick Des Barres

On a freezing, rainy day in January, **play** editors Nick Des Barres and Dai Kohama were invited to Namco Bandai's Tokyo offices for an exclusive glimpse at a top-secret new project, the existence of which had only been made known two weeks before: Tales of Vesperia. A stunning 720p teaser trailer released to the net on the last day of 2007 confirmed that Japan's third-most popular RPG series was going gloriously next-gen, with an aesthetic that can only be described as "living anime." The trailer made it clear we were dealing with a high-def game, and to paraphrase a statement made by director Yoshito Higuchi in the days following the teaser's release, "that can only mean one of two systems."

Imagine our surprise when we entered a Namco Bandai conference room to find an elaborate shrine-like display of the Tales series's past triumphs...and a lone Xbox 360. The company has been famously high on Microsoft's 'box of late, blessing it with games like Beautiful Katamari, Ace Combat 6, and Eternal Sonata, but the Tales series represents what is arguably the most valuable non-anime brand the company controls in Japan. And it goes without saying, Japan hasn't been too hot on 360. While the revelation of platform proved a shock, so did the quality of the game–but for completely different reasons. Tales of Vesperia manages to trump Ubisoft's Naruto and Namco's own Japan-only The IDOLM@STER visually, with jaw-dropping next-gen cel shading and huge, expansive background vistas that seem straight out of a Studio Ghibli film. Best real-time 3-D anime visuals ever? Take a look at these screens and get back to me.

What can we expect from the game itself? More trademark RPG excellence from Team Symphonia (responsible for Tales of Symphonia on GameCube, and Tales of the Abyss on PlayStation 2), with instantly likeable characters, cunning puzzle dungeons, and, of course, frenetic, pyrotechnic, fighting game-inspired real-time action battles. Vesperia will mark the series's tenth anniversary in North America, and Namco is promising for the first time ever to put real muscle behind its English release. Both Symphonia and Abyss are generally considered to be among the finest J-RPG localizations of all time, so it would seem safe to assume this game will be just as good, if not better. As to *when* this role-playing animextravaganza might be spinning in our Xboxen, the teaser trailer touted only a release date of "2008" (Namco's lips are sealed on the matter, but the smart money for the initial Japanese release would seem to be fourth quarter).

We wish we were able to tell you more about Tales of Vesperia, but **play** necessarily walked into Namco Bandai's lair as information virgins, armed with only what we could glean from watching the one minute, fifty-second teaser for hours on end. Although director Higuchi and producer Tsutomu Gouda were unforthcoming with many details (such as the names of any characters besides protagonist Yuri and apparent antagonist Flynn), they were surprisingly candid about other aspects, including the reality of the Xbox 360's current situation in Japan and the perception of the Tales series around the world. It was clear they are very excited about their new baby, and it was impossible not to get swept up by their enthusiasm.



Interview

Yoshito Higuchi, Director and Tsutomu Gouda, Producer

Interview by Nick Des Barres & Dai Kohama / Transcribed by Dai Kohama
Translated by Nick Des Barres

play: Thanks for sitting down with us today. Can you first tell us about your role in the Tales series so far?

Yoshito Higuchi: I wasn't an original member of the Tales team. I began in planning on the original Soulcalibur for arcade and Dreamcast, and eventually joined Tales after a number of other projects. My first was Tales of Symphonia on GameCube, followed by the overseas versions, and a PlayStation 2 port which was only released in Japan. Most recently I directed Tales of the Abyss, and now I'm directing Tales of Vesperia.

Is Vesperia being developed by the same team as Symphonia and Abyss?

YH: Mostly, yes. We originally called ourselves "Team Symphonia"–you could say 90% of us are working on Vesperia today, myself and the scenario writer included. All of the core staff remain the same.

Unusually for a Tales, this game hasn't even been officially announced in Japan yet. We don't have much information at all–can you introduce

"Vesperia will have the most anime FMV of any Tales yet, in full 720p HD."

the project for us?
YH: Well, we've set our target age range for Vesperia a little higher than previous games. Tales is usually aimed at middle and high school students–teenagers. With this game being on HD hardware, we want to cater to the high school/university student age range and higher. Tales games are usually stories about the main character's growth, but you could say our main character for Vesperia, Yuri, already has a fully-formed personality. His narrative purpose is really to spur growth in the friends he meets along his journey. This is one of the two key through lines of our story.

And the other?
YH: This will take some explaining, but Yuri is a very empathetic person. He cares deeply about his friends and family, though he doesn't have any blood relatives of his own. As an example, let's say he's faced with two problems: On one hand there's someone in a lot of trouble–let's say this person is starving and penniless. At the same time some faction or other may be trying to perpetrate much larger crimes. Yuri is the kind of person who would judge the larger crime to be out of his reach, and he'd try to save the starving person first. In contrast to that, we have another character, Flynn, who Yuri grew up with. Like Yuri, he has a strong sense of justice and wants to better the world, but he wants to do it from within the establishment. Flynn's looking at the bigger picture, trying to use politics to better his country. The conflict and contrast between Yuri and Flynn is our other main through line.

Would you say they're like rivals?
YH: In a way, yes. It's not as if they're necessarily at odds with one another, though over the course of the game their differences in ideology will cause them to clash. By the way, in the short teaser trailer you can see on the net, Yuri is the character with long black hair, and Flynn the one in white armor.

I watched that teaser so many times (laughs). The visuals made it obvious this game would be HD, but I have to admit I was very surprised to discover just minutes ago that Vesperia is for Xbox 360.
YH: Oh? Why is that? (laughs)

I wondered if you were aiming directly at the Western markets.
YH: No, it's not like that at all–we're not that bigheaded yet (laughs). Like always, I think that our Japanese fans understand Tales the best. But does that mean Tales can't succeed in the West? Of course not–Symphonia proved that there are plenty of Western gamers who appreciate the very Japanese sense Tales has. Our goal is to make this game for everyone who appreciates that sort of aesthetic, so, no, we're not aiming directly at the Western market.

We love the 360, but it hasn't been doing very well in Japan.
YH: I suppose you want to ask, "why 360?" (laughs) We had actually begun research into HD hardware while still working on Abyss. When Abyss was finished, it was very well received, and we had to decide where we were going next. There were many possibilities–at the time, we could certainly have done another game on PS2. But we felt there was a need to go HD. Logic would dictate we'd have to do it eventually, so why not now? That left two choices. When we started this project, the 360 had the more complete development environment.

Was that the only reason?
YH: Well, even though the West isn't our main target, I knew we had to cater to our overseas fans as well, so that's another reason. But this doesn't mean we're not going to work on PS3 or other hardware–just that Tales is coming to the 360 first.

Can you see Vesperia getting ported to PS3 some time in the future, like Eternal Sonata?
YH: Yes, I won't deny the possibility. But we're not thinking about it yet–there are so many other things to concentrate on first.

I was also surprised because Namco Bandai stated just last year that the Nintendo DS would be the lead platform for Tales going forward.
YH: Uh oh, the hard questions (laughs).

Is that still the case?
YH: Well, I don't want to play word games here (laughs). I think what they meant was that the DS would be the lead platform for Tales in 2007. The industry is going through such dizzying change lately, and you do have to change with the times. A statement like that reflects on the entire Tales brand, so I can't really say too much about it (laughs). For me, personally, I don't think the people that actually make the games should decide whether or not their title is in the main Tales series. In the case of Vesperia, I'd like to leave that decision up to the fans. If they see these images and think it's a spin off, then it certainly is. But if they think of it as the main series...

I think most people will consider Vesperia to be in the main series (laughs).
YH: I think so too. Of course, I also think Tales is the kind of series that needs an installment on every platform–it's our duty to the fans. I think it would be very difficult to try and consolidate Tales onto one platform. Even so, when that announcement was made, last July, it goes without saying the DS was the best-selling hardware. I do believe it was the right decision for 2007.

I'm just relieved Tales isn't actually abandoning consoles.
YH: That's a good reaction (laughs). You know, when that announcement was made, Vesperia had been in development longer than all the other Tales games that were slated to be released. I mean, we'd been working on it since even before Abyss. It was a little difficult standing silently by the sidelines while a "lead platform" for the series was being announced (laughs). But our fans are very sharp...I think they probably knew, "this can't be".

I know, at least, that the DS announcement didn't make American Tales fans very happy.
YH: But Dragon Quest IX is going to be on DS, right? I think that was the right choice. I really do.

From a financial perspective, I'd agree.
YH: Yes, that too, but everything about DQIX...isn't it so perfectly Japanese?

You could certainly say that.
YH: That's why I think it was right. But Tales has been 3-D since Symphonia, so.. how should I put it. In my personal opinion, when speaking of the "right" evolution for a series...if high-spec hardware with beautiful graphics capabilities come out, then you have to make beautiful, high-spec games for it–while still ensuring they have a good deal of content. That's one "right" path evolution can take. In the case of other hardware like Wii or DS, shouldn't you try something completely different from what's come before? Something suited to the hardware? That's what I believe.

You said earlier that Symphonia proved the West could be accepting of Tales. Why do you think that particular game did so well overseas, and why do you think Abyss was a sales disappointment?
YH: I think the biggest factor was probably the state of the market at the time. Also, Symphonia was only available on GameCube, and the system had a huge share of the younger gamer market. In Europe, Nintendo published the game themselves, and marketed it extremely effectively to that age range. In the case of Abyss, I often hear that Japanese RPGs are hard to sell on PS2–when the Western gamer thinks "RPG" and "PS2", they naturally think "Final Fantasy". So, if they hear about a Tales, they may expect a game like FF, but the visuals tell them it's something completely different. I think we always knew Abyss would be a little tough to sell overseas. Of course, that doesn't mean it was a worse game than Symphonia, or that it wouldn't resonate with Western audiences. I think it was mainly a problem with perception.

Of course, we loved Abyss–we gave it a 9, and it was well-received by many other publications as well.
YH: Yes, we were very happy with the actual review scores...they actually served to make us realize we had made a mistake (laughs). Or perhaps I should say we were biased. Abyss was a very dark story, wasn't it? Really heavy, especially the middle section. I hope I don't sound rude, but we used to have a bias: we thought stories like that would fly in Japan, and maybe France, but wouldn't be accepted very well elsewhere. The Abyss reviews let us completely cast that bias aside. We realized we didn't have to be so concerned about the tone for overseas markets. It's funny, because that original bias actually served us well in Vesperia–one of our executives in charge of sales in America read the story and told me, "This is great! Yuri's awesome! He's like Jack Bauer!". I didn't really understand at first, but... (laughs)

Does Yuri not get a lot of sleep? (laughs)
YH: It's sort of like what I said before. Laws don't mean much to Yuri. If he thinks he has to help someone, he doesn't feel any constraints in terms of the expectations of society. There's no "way things are done" for him. When our executive explained to me that this trait was cool in a Jack Bauer-ish way, I completely understood what he meant (laughs).

Yuri sounds like the polar opposite of Luke from Abyss.
YH: He is. You could definitely say that–he doesn't do a lot of growing up during the story, for one thing. But he does gain

The environments in Tales of Vesperia appear almost drawn on canvas, thanks to fancy blending tech and a strict design policy that dictated all hand painted textures

The first non-humanoid party member in Tales history. In battle Yuri's little canine companion seems to grip a dagger in his maw and on the world maps, long thin pipe. What's he smoking, yo? Dognip

experience. Do you remember the giant floating ring over the city from the teaser trailer? It's a barrier–in Vesperia, the world's energy balance is breaking down, and there are more and more monsters being born. These barriers, projected from artifacts called "blastia", protect the cities from monster attacks. In the world of Vesperia, most people will never set foot outside the town they were born in.

The outside world is a complete unknown?
YH: Not entirely–a select few venture outside to do research, and there are military posts. Yuri himself was once a knight, so he has been outside briefly, but most people from his city have probably never even seen the sea. In contrast, Flynn regularly journeys outside to fight monsters and has seen a great many things there. Yuri becomes a little envious of that, and he decides to leave his city and see the world. In his case, it's really a story of gaining experience. But how about you see for yourself? *(Ed.note–Mr. Higuchi hands* **play** *an Xbox 360 controller.)* I'm afraid the intro anime isn't done yet, but

Tales are always famous for their beautiful anime intros. Is Production I.G. handling this one again?
YH: Yes, but not just the intro–during the game, too. Vesperia will have the most anime FMV of any Tales yet, in full 720p HD.

Are you shooting for one DVD?
YH: Yes, it will all fit (laughs). But I think it will probably be dual layer.

This game looks absolutely spectacular in motion.
YH: Thank you. We've worked very hard to keep it "Tales-y".

It really looks like a living anime. The way colors in the far distance bleed together, but the geometry remains sharp, like a hand-painted background–it's so much more appealing than games that try to impart a sense of distance with a simple rack-focus or tilt-shift type of blur effect.
YH: I agree, if you try to be realistic with focus effects it's just going to end up looking like Eternal Sonata. We were very conscious of not making it look like that game. I think Eternal Sonata is a very high-quality product, but it's not Tales, is it? For an anime look you have to keep a certain flatness.

Ah, the battles are 60 frames?
YH: I'm glad somebody noticed (laughs). You'd be surprised how many people, even developers, can't really tell the difference. Yes, our field graphics are 30 frames, and battles 60 in Vesperia.

The battle system itself seems very Abyss. Is it still the FR-LMBS, "Flex-Range Linear Motion Battle System?"
YH: It's an extension of that, called EFR-LMBS: "Evolved Flex-Range Linear Motion Battle System". Are system names very important in the West? (laughs) You might be surprised, but most Japanese don't really pay them much mind.

I was always under the impression that they were really big in Japan (laughs). How exactly has it been "Evolved"?
YH: Oh, so many ways (laughs). For instance, you know how a lot of MMORPGS have enemy links? We've incorporated that into Vesperia. If you get into an encounter where other enemies on the map can see each other, two or three groups of them might link together. In that case you might find yourself fighting seven or eight enemies at once.

In the new Tales of Innocence on DS, you can actually attack enemies on the field before you enter battle to gain an advantage. Will there be anything like that in Vesperia?
YH: You can't actually attack them, but you do get the traditional Tales series Sorcerer's Ring and can affect enemies on the map with it. Also, you can now stock up to four Over Limit gauges. You can use one per character, or even use all four with one character...it's up to you. I can't say too much about it yet, but depending on your Over Limit level some interesting stuff can happen (laughs). Your regular attacks might get faster, or you might be able to uses Artes in rapid succession. You can create some pretty crazy combos with it.

Will dungeons be mostly puzzle-based, like Symphonia, or will it be more of a mix like Abyss?
YH: In Symphonia almost every single dungeon was full of puzzles and gimmicks, but we think we achieved a nice balance in Abyss. You might have one straightforward dungeon, then a puzzle dungeon, back to straightforward again...Vesperia also has that kind of balance.

Speaking of the contrasts between those two games, Symphonia's affection system was greatly simplified in Abyss. What will it be like in Vesperia?
YH: I'd say it's more like Abyss. I'd like to do another really deep relationship system like Symphonia's some day, but it's an incredible amount of work. This time we wanted to concentrate entirely on making one pure, solid RPG, so there are no story branches based on affection. You have no idea how difficult those branches were to build in Symphonia (laughs). But people really seemed to like them. Tales of Symphonia: Dawn of the New World on Wii will have that kind of system.
Tsutomu Gouda: Dawn of the New World will have a complex affection system, but there aren't any story branches (laughs).

So no multiple endings for Vesperia?
YH: No, only one true ending.

How about minigames? Everyone loved Dragon Buster in Abyss (laughs).
YH: I think we'll have something on par with previous games. I can't say yet if it will be as involved as Dragon Buster. We have a plan for one, but time is starting to get very short, so we may or may not be able to implement it. On the 360 you have Live!, right? There are going to be a number of online rankings, and we're hoping one of those will be a ranking for the minigame.

Are you planning on any other Live! features?
YH: Definitely, but I'm not exactly sure what, yet (laughs). I can tell you that as a matter of policy we won't have anything you can *only* get through buying online. For example, we may have some items that are very hard to get in the game available as DLC, for people who would rather spend money instead of time on them.

So nothing like the DLC dungeons we see in games like Blue Dragon and Lost Odyssey?
YH: It's technically feasible–everything in the game is designed to be expandable. But I don't think we'll do it. I personally feel that it would be wrong for Tales's identity.

That's a very refreshing stance to hear on DLC.
YH: We at Team Symphonia were the first to add the "recap" system to the Tales series. Our decision not to have DLC-only features came from the same spirit–as you become an adult, you can't really play games every day, can you? Some people might only be able to play on the weekends–two or three hours per week. At that rate, you begin to forget the story...so that's why we implemented the recaps. Our stance with the DLC in Vesperia is the same: It's for gamers without a lot of free time. With that said, the ultimate achievement in Vesperia can't be bought with money. You have to do it yourself, and I think that's the way it should be.

How much total content can we expect, compared to past Tales games?
YH: I think it's very comparable to Abyss. That's rather a lot, and I think it's just the right amount (laughs). When we decided to build a next-gen game with the same amount of content as Abyss–I suppose it's really current-gen now, but it was definitely next-gen when we started–we had no idea how much work it would be (laughs). For example, the average map was now taking twice as long to build. What should we do? Alter the game design by reducing the total number of maps by half, and having the player visit each one twice? That's not something we could do. We were putting all our efforts into making a next-gen game. If we had to come up with a new design it would never get finished (laughs). With that being the case, we increased the size of the project, got a bit more time, and committed to make it just as big as our last game. I think it's a more effective use of our experience, and I think our fans would prefer it that way. In that sense Vesperia truly is the high-def, next-generation Tales.

TG: We're confident Tales fans will be totally satisfied with both the quality and the content. There really aren't that many games lately that have both, are there? One or the other always seems to be compromised.

Can you go into a bit more detail about how much more time-consuming it is to produce assets for hi-def than it is standard-def? A lot of people don't really know the difference.
YH: Well, on some games it's not that different. Take for example something like Ace Combat or Tekken–those games use actual photographs as textures. But on Vesperia, every single texture is hand-painted. Simply increasing the textures by a factor of two means there are quadruple the pixels. Like I said, it was taking double the time to finish a single map, but we were eventually able to streamline it down to about 120% of the time it took on Abyss or Symphonia. So, yes, asset creation was difficult. Another issue is the fact that you have no limits. HD machines have so much power...on our world map, for instance, we could have taken the camera down behind

"We could certainly have done another game on PS2. But we felt there was a need to go HD. Logic would dictate we'd have to do it eventually, so why not now?"

the player's back and displayed the entire horizon. But that camera angle wouldn't be Tales, right? Ensuring we didn't use a th s power for the wrong things was a challenge. We could have gone with naturally-proportioned characters and full motion capture, but it would cost an enormous amount of money (laughs). Strik ng a balance between what was possible on an HD system, and a final product that would be recognizable immediately as "next-gen Tales" was very difficult.

Was there anything about the lack of limits that was freeing?
YH: Hmm. We , this s go ng to be a little self-deprecating, but. . *(Ed. note–Higuchi picks up the 360 controller and begins to play.)* You see where I am on screen now? *(Ed. note–Higuchi moves a few screens ahead in the map.)* If I'd moved that far in Abyss, it would already be loading. On next-gen, we can a ways be stream ng data. We st ll have fades to black and screen transit ons, but that doesn't mean it's loading–we're merely using them to inform the player he's travelled a signif cant distance. That was the most freeing thing for me, especia ly since a lot of people weren't happy with Abyss's load ng times. Actually, when we started the project, and were trying to figure out how to partition map data, the programmers told me we could technica ly do the entire game seamless (laughs). I decided aga nst it, though–I didn't yet have the confidence to try and break the town-interior-battle map structure. Even so, we've kept screen transitions as min.ma as possib e, especially inside towns. This rea y made a huge difference for us. The RAM you have on next-gen is just in a completely different league (laughs). Another wonderful thing–although this is strictly about Xbox 360–is the fact that you can connect to the net so eas y. Hardcore Tales fans are fond of getting the most out of the series, and I th nk it's go ng to be a lot of fun comparing Ach evements and leaderboards online.

Can you put a percentage on how complete the game is?
YH: I'd say were about 60% of the way towards releas ng it as a product

Can you tell us what the meaning of the title, "Tales of Vesperia", is yet?
YH: It comes from "Vesper", an ancient Latin name for the Evening Star–what we know to be the planet Venus today. It's an allegory for Yuri. He wants to be like a bright star shining in the darkness–hence, Vesper, which was "Tales-ified" into "Vesperia". The word "Vesperia" also appears as a story e ement. When peop e get to play the game I think they' understand why we chose this title

One thing I love about Tales in Japan is that the games aren't just vanilla "RPGs", each one has its own rather eccentric genre name. I see that Vesperia is *"'Seigi' wo Tsuranukitoosu RPG"*–literally, "The RPG of Persistence in One's Will for 'Justice'". How are the genre names decided? Do they come before, or after the plot?
YH: Some come before, but in the case of Vesperia, when the story was finished we asked ourselves, "how do you sum th s up in one sentence"? The or gina theme of the game is the concept of persistence n one's beliefs. We tried that–"The RPG of Persistence in Beliefs", but t just didn't have enough impact. Considering that this Tales is aimed at mostly males, we tried something intentiona ly mmature–"The RPG of Persistence in One's Will for Justice". But even this wasn't enough, it didn't have a real Ta es-y hook. Since everyone has the r own concept of what "justice" is, we added the quotat on marks "The RPG of Persistence in One's Will for 'Just ce'" worked

I guess that's the kind of thing that works much better in a compact language like Japanese. Speaking of such things, I wanted to ask about a couple of aspects that have long troubled Western Tales fans. In Japan, all the optional "Skits" are fully voiced, and the intro always has a vocal theme song. Can we ever expect these aspects to be localized?
YH: I think you can (laughs).
TG: I think the skits will have English voice. And the theme song, too.
YH: You might say our vocalist s someone with worldwide appeal (laughs)
TG: You' l be pretty surprised when you find out who it is (a ughs).

That's excellent news! Western Tales fans are going to be very, very happy about that. So the recording artist performing the theme song will be the same worldwide?
YH: Yes, the same person.

As a Tales fan, I'm very excited about Vesperia–but also curious as to why Namco Bandai is choosing to reveal it in the Western press simultaneously with Japan. This has never happened before. Does it mean a worldwide simultaneous release?
YH RPGs are really gigantic, aren't they? When it comes to Europe a game has to be localized into f ve anguages. For North America, however...nothing is offic ally decided yet, but don't expect a very ong wait after the Japanese release We're working on English and Japanese versions simultaneously
TG Just by v rtue of the game being on Xbox 360, it doesn't make much sense to eave a large gap between re eases.
YH: We're the only Tales team mak ng worldwide games. On both Symphonia and Abyss we knew there would be Western vers ons from day one, but until now those versions were a ways done after the Japanese one was comp ete. W th next gen, however, we decided it would be best to develop Japanese and overseas versions concurrently.

This must be the first Tales that began localization so quickly.
YH: It's the f rst. Def nitely the first. Our leve of confidence about the English version of Vesperia is pretty h gh (a ughs).
TG. It's also going to be the Tales series's tenth anniversary in America th s year, starting from Tales of Destiny on PSone. We're putt ng a lot of effort into it.

Do you think this might be the first Tales that sells better overseas than in Japan?
YH: Actua y, the sales of Eternal Sonata n Japan gave us a certain evel of confidence that Vesperia will do well here. And, of course, a platform with ten million units doesn't mean you're go ng to sell ten million copies of your game. Also, t's probab y safe to say that a 550,000 Xbox 360 owners in Japan are hardcore gamers

That's probably true (laughs).
YH: If you look at how many games there are that can sel more than 500,000 copies n Japan...no matter what the platform, there aren't many at all. Theoretically we could sell 550 000 copies of Vesperia. That would be fa rly d fficult, of course (laughs).
TG: In the past, we've always thought about hardware penetration–if a system had so-and-so number of users, we could expect so-and-so number of sales But I th nk that market wisdom might not app y anymore

> "Don't expect a very long wait after the Japanese release. We're working on English and Japanese versions simultaneously."

YH: In terms of evel of use and attach rate, the 360 s extremely high, and I think there's a definite chance there
TG: As of now the best-selling 360 game in Japan is Blue Dragon, and as the producer for Vesperia I'd like to get close to that number
YH: If we actually sold more than Blue Dragon, I think it would be pretty historic.

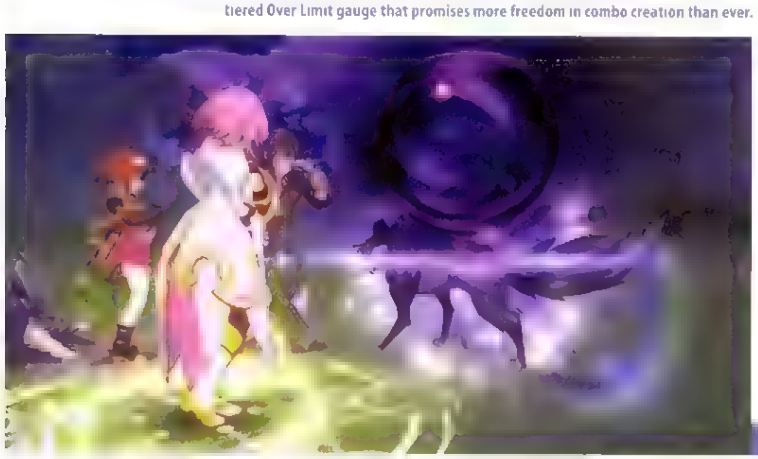
With a long-running, trusted series like Tales, I'm sure it's possible.
YH: There are probably a lot of Tales fans that would still like to p ay the series on PS2. How do we get those users interested n next-gen hardware? I th nk Vesperia absolutely must be a product that can do that
TG: We're working on Vesperia with the idea that it will be the game that takes the ent re Tales brand into its next phase and states, "this is what Tales will be ke from now on".

I'm sure it will be! Our time is nearly up, but there's one more thing I must ask. Lloyd from Symphonia recently made a guest appearance in Soulcalibur Legends. Mr. Higuchi, you worked on that series yourself...do you think we might see Yuri in Soulcalibur IV?
YH: Wouldn't that be nice! (laughs) Well, I don't know about IV specifically, but...in the case of Legends, that's a group that sort of split off from the main Soulcalibur team, and I've been very close with them since the very first game. I went to Kosuke Fujish ma, our Tales character designer, and asked if they could use Lloyd n their game almost as a lark (laughs) I can't promise anything about IV, but it's true we've been able to do a lot of interesting things since becoming Namco Bandai. If you want to see Yuri in Soulcalibur IV, send us ots of e-mails about t! Send a hundred per day! (laughs)

(All laugh)
YH: I guess that would constitute spam (laughs)

Mr. Higuchi, Mr. Gouda, thank you for a wonderful interview. If you have a message for your American Tales fans...
YH We've always been serious about Tales, but in the case of Tales of Vesperia our "seriousness factor" is many times higher than it's ever been (laughs). Of course, the series is still made with a very Japanese sens bility, but we know there are a lot of American gamers that share the same tastes, and we've incorporated a lot of feedback from the American s de nto th s game I think this will be a somewhat different Tales, but you can be assured it's still the Tales you love. We'll be coming out n America very shortly after the Japanese version, so please look forward to it.

It goes without saying series mainstays Mystic Artes will make an appearance, though this time with a multi tiered Over Limit gauge that promises more freedom in combo creation than ever.



Obscure: The Aftermath

The most accurately titled franchise in gaming

words Casey Loe

If you aren't familiar with the Obscure series (formerly known as ObsCure), that makes two of us. Apparently it's a French developed survival-horror franchise that uses a narrative structure reminiscent of Hollywood slasher movies, serving up a large cast of playable characters so the game can brutally kill them one by one. The Aftermath revolves around a bunch of college kids who are experimenting with a new recreational drug made from a mysterious flower. I don't really get the appeal—a good whiff seems to take you to Silent Hill for a series of gruesome nightmares while simultaneously infecting you with Resident Evil's T-Virus. Now, I don't mean to imply that Obscure is a rip-off of Silent Hill and Resident Evil, but… Nah, that's exactly what I meant to imply. But surprisingly, it's seems like a pretty good one. One of the coolest aspects of the game is that you're always controlling two characters at once, and you can swap between them whenever you need to use a character's special ability (like gymnastics or hacking) to solve a puzzle. At any time a second player can jump in to take over the second character, and while this screws up the camera somewhat, a co-op option is a rare treat in a survival horror game.

While the game's feel and mechanics will be instantly familiar to SH and RE fans, it does manage to carve out its own special brand of suspense. There aren't a lot of games out there that are willing to permanently kill their own playable characters, but Obscure does so gleefully, and in quite shocking ways. (One was apparently so shocking that it got the game pulled from stores upon its UK release.) But the most exciting thing about Obscure is its bargain price—at $30, it doesn't cost much more than a DVD of one of the slasher flicks from which it draws its inspiration.

Baroque

Prepare to have your spirit Baroquen

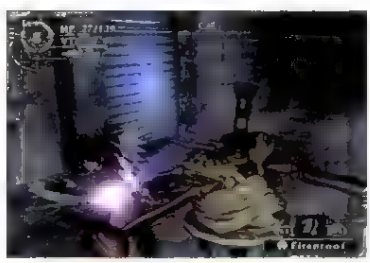
words Casey Loe

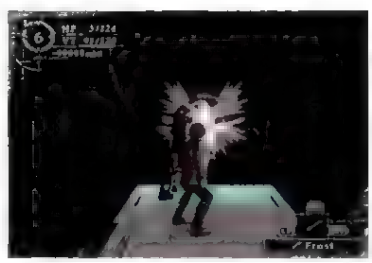
Baroque was one of the weirdest games to grace the Saturn's library, and three remakes later it hasn't lost much of its impact. At its core, it's a Mystery Dungeon game (or Rogue game, if you prefer), where you make a series of forays into a single, huge, randomized dungeon. But unlike the Mystery Dungeon series, which tries to win over casual gamers with its Chocobo and Pokémon heroes and its leisurely board-game battle system, Baroque delivers button-mashing action and game mechanics that pull no punches.

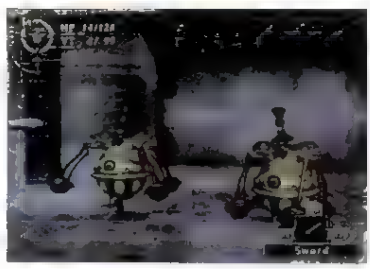
Baroque is so hardcore it almost seems vengeful, as if Mario Party had killed its mom, or Scene It? had raped its sister. Whatever the reason, Baroque is taking it out on its players—it's extremely challenging, confusing by design, and all too happy to punish anyone who make sloppy mistakes. Those are some of the things that made Etrian Odyssey great, and if you enjoyed that game's old-school flavor, you'll find a lot to appreciate here. But in Baroque's case, hardcore is also code for "uses a lot of old-school mechanics that other developers dropped because they're not much fun." So expect to be infuriated by incurable status conditions, strict inventory management systems, and unfair random ambushes. Hardcoreness is a double-edged sword, and Baroque certainly cuts both ways.

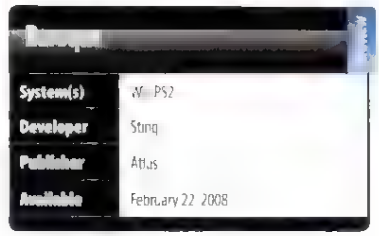
The plot of Baroque is a mystery—you're in some sort of post-apocalyptic world that has been reduced to ashes by an event called "The Blaze," which may or may not have been your fault. The remaining population consists of a handful of enigmatic freaks—an antlered woman, a hanged man, a tormented angel—all of whom speak in riddles. The lone road out of town leads to a large, ever-growing central tower packed with deformed creatures (the monster design is quite strong) and more mysterious characters. Getting to the end of this tower accomplishes little—to progress, you must make sense of the riddles and figure out some specific action, like finding a certain item and bringing it to a certain character. This often involves challenging the dungeon multiple times—once to figure out what you're supposed to do, another time to find the item and throw it into a mechanism that will transport it to the surface, and a third time to start with that item and take it to where it's supposed to go. Whether you complete the dungeon or die in the process makes little difference—either way your stats will be reset to level 1 and you'll keep nothing but the few items you manage to transport to the surface. It's an unusual way to structure a game, and it takes quite a bit of getting used to.

Baroque will definitely make an impact when it comes out for the Wii, at the end of February. Sharing shelf space with weaksauce titles like Dragon Quest Swords and Opoona, Baroque easily claims the crown as the most hardcore RPG on the platform. And even in the RPG-filled PS2 library, Baroque stands out as a game that isn't quite like any other—for better and for worse.







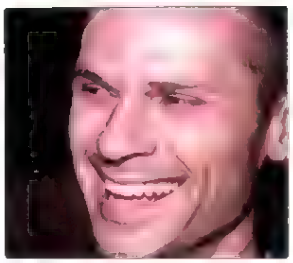


Reviews

March 2008

Dave Halverson

Dave can't seem to let go of the past or get enough of the future, causing a strange genetic abnormality to take place. Immune to the burden of sleep or adulthood, E.Storm plays games new and old, both console and handheld by day, and fades away into any number of strange Japanese cartoons by night, leaving only time to write it all down and ponder the true meaning of the universe.

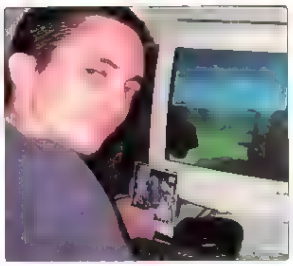


Brady Fiechter

Under constant pressure by a friend to flee the country and study the ways of the Thaoist, Brady continues to balk, proclaiming that his spiritual journey lies in movies and games. He finds joyful satisfaction in killing things, namely zombies and soldiers and evil creatures, which tend to pop up in some of his favorite genres.

Greg Orlando

Of Greg Orlando, historians agree that he is, without question, the finest human being to be mentioned in this sentence. A veteran of the Cola Wars, thrice decorated, Orlando understands the universe's great solitary truth: if the mule don't kick, you know the mule don't ride. He is currently missing, presumed pantsless.



Mike Griffin

Even as a wee lad playing Zaxxon on Coleco, the technology and artistry of game design has always fascinated Mike. He thinks some games are timeless in that respect, whether 2D, 3D, flat shaded or bump mapped. Mike's goal is to equip the readers with accurate information, so that limited funds and time can be put to good use.

Burnout Paradise

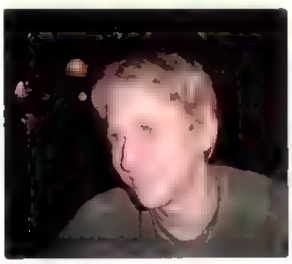
p. 056

The play rating system

10...Perfect
9...Extraordinary
8...Great
7...Good
6...Decent
5...Average
4...Below average
3...Poor
2...Bad
1...Terrible

Nick Des Barres

Nick fondly remembers the first video game he ever played: Trojan, by Capcom on the NES. He wishes he could claim even earlier gaming roots, and the modern-day Nick would probably be affronted by the reference to "Trojan" and insist it be called "Tataka: No Banka (Elegy For Battle)", but the fact remains that he's been playing games daily for nearly twenty years and writing about them for twelve. He tends to gravitate towards the classic genres of his youth: RPGs, action/adventure, shooting



Casey Loe

Casey had a promising future as a video game journalist a decade ago, but booze pills, and his all-consuming hatred of Final Fantasy VII ultimately left him incomprehensible and unemployable. After spending eight years on the street ranting about Squall Leonhart to winos, schizophrenics, and syphilitic prostitutes, Casey has tricked an old friend into paying him to complain about video games in a national video game magazine.

Eric Patterson

Eric's reason for over two decades of video gaming is simple: so far, real life has yet to provide him access to zombies, quiet resort towns overrun with demons, ghosts you can trap with a camera, or you know, a flesh and blood Jill Valentine or Ashley Graham. Mind getting on that, real life?

Heather Campbell

Heather's favorite game would be a hybrid of Street Fighter II and MMORPG leveling. If someone would craft a title that was endless hours of fighting the same enemies using classic Capcom button combos, then her death in front of the arcade cabinet would become the stuff of urban legend. Heather's been playing since Aztec Adventure, and still has nightmares about Missile Defence 3-D.

Mike Hobbs

A gamer since Space Invaders, Michael has a soft spot for 2D shooters and other games that directly engage the player. Nintendo certainly ranks high on his list of ideal developers. He's also recently become addicted to RC sailplane flying, so you'll actually find him outside now, absorbing the sun's photons.

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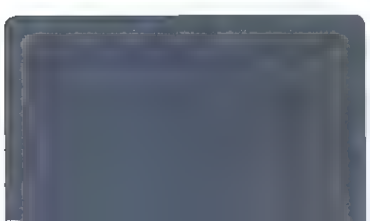
Lost Odyssey

Final Fantasy XI from a modern, less alternate dimension

words Casey Loe

"Lost Odyssey overcomes a lack of originality through expert craftsmanship."

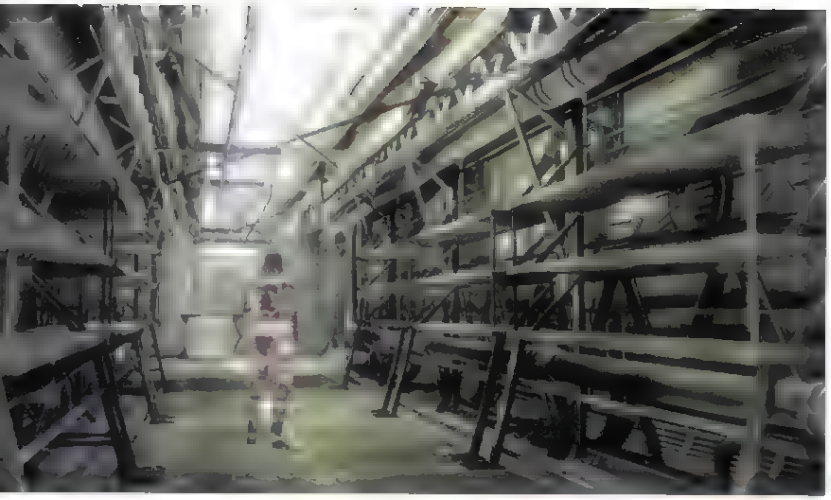


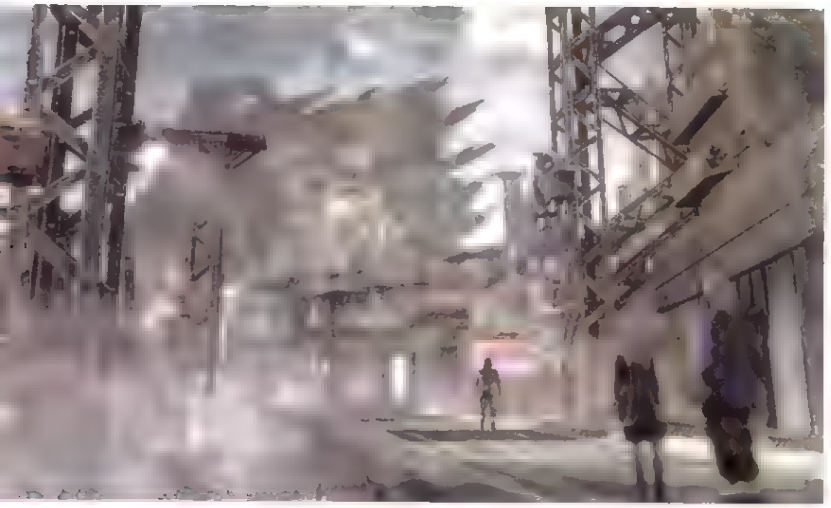
Even monsters that fly will fall in the face of your tremendous power.

began to worry about Lost Odyssey when writer/producer Hironobu Sakaguchi told a Japanese magazine that he was aiming for a game with 20 hours of gameplay and 20 hours of story scenes. But it turned out that either Sakaguchi is horrible at doing publicity, or is some sort of twisted genius who intentionally sets expectations so low that his games can't fail to impress. Lost Odyssey turned out to be a far better game than I, and perhaps he, had expected it to be.

Lost Odyssey is an RPG in the vein of Final Fantasy X and Shadowhearts, where there is no real contiguous overworld, just a series of beautifully rendered areas shown only through fixed camera angles. Battles occur at random when you're attacked by (typically) unseen enemies, and take place on a separate battlefield that has to be painstakingly loaded in and out of each time. RPGs like this were the norm in the early days of the PlayStation 2, so I have no doubt that Lost Odyssey will be savaged by other magazines for not being sufficiently "next-gen." I must admit that I'm a little disappointed not to see more innovation in the genre, but I can't hold using a tried-and-true formula against Lost Odyssey—after all, first-person shooters haven't changed much either, and no one holds that against them. And like a great FPS, Lost Odyssey overcomes a lack of originality through expert craftsmanship—its environments are beautiful, its battle system is well designed, and its quest is lengthy and thoroughly engaging.

Lost Odyssey opens with an intriguing premise—hero Kaim is a world-weary immortal who has lived for a thousand years, but remembers very little of it. On his quest he'll meet other immortals in a similar situation, and gradually they'll recover their memories together. Most of these recovered memories come in the form of short stories that are collected in an in-game compilation titled "A Thousand Years of Dreams," which can be read when they're unlocked by in-game events, or later by selecting them from the title screen. The stories are typically tragedies: Kaim has killed thousands of men in his career as a mercenary, and buried dozens of wives and hundreds of children during his ill-fated attempts at living a normal life. Each story is accompanied by light music,





soft-focus background illustrations, and cool text effects, but there's no escaping the fact that each one contains several thousands words of, like, *literature*. I don't condone reading and culture and such—that seems like a slippery slope that could lead to riding public transportation, listening to public radio, and losing the ability to appreciate *American Idol*. And yet, I still found these stories to be among Lost Odyssey's highlights. They're all written by a famous Japanese novelist and translated by acclaimed literary translator Jay Rubin so they read extremely well in English. And while the stories do not directly connect to the game's present-day scenario, they do serve the purpose of transforming Kaim from a brooding asshole into a tragic hero, and make Lost Odyssey's world feel like a far grander and deeper place than it would otherwise seem. You're free to skip them, of course, but if you don't, you'll come out of Lost Odyssey having read *an entire actual book*. You can probably get college credit for shit like that!

But while "A Thousand Years of Dreams" writer Kiyoshi Shigematsu has done great things with Lost Odyssey's backstory, he had nothing to do with the game's present-day scenario, which was written by Sakaguchi himself. I don't want to ruin anything, but I must warn you that the explanations for many of the mysteries surrounding Kaim are totally lame, and the story abandons any attempts at character development in its latter half. Japanese RPG fans have endured plenty of thin stories in otherwise great games, but no RPG has ever devoted more time and effort to telling so feeble a tale as Lost Odyssey. And it certainly doesn't help that outside of the "A Thousand Years of Dreams" stories, the game text is extremely dry and often incorrectly translated. At least Lost Odyssey's event scenes are never boring. They're beautifully directed, animated, and scored, and Microsoft sprung for some professional voice actors who do a good job of selling fairly weak dialogue. And the story does have plenty of great moments such as a lengthy sequence when the heroes are split into three different parties to witness three sides of a world-changing event. But no matter how many simple thrills the story dishes out along the way, it never provides the character development and big twists that the game's dramatic opening chapters will leave you expecting.

It's fortunate, then, that it offers virtually everything else you'd want from an RPG. Lost Odyssey isn't exactly a technical marvel, but it's certainly an artistic triumph. Each of its cities is huge, distinct, and packed with detail, and its world design is both unique and impressive. Nobuo Uematsu has once again turned out a fantastic soundtrack, although it tends towards sleepy ambient tracks outside of event scenes and major battles. Nevertheless, the various boss and character themes are as powerful and memorable as the best tracks he's done for the Final Fantasy series, and go a long way towards making the Lost Odyssey experience a memorable one.

Your party mixes both mortal and immortal characters, and the battle system has been cleverly designed to show off the strength of the immortals while providing an incentive to play the much weaker mortals. Immortals are stronger, tougher, and can learn any skill from any mortal character. But to add new skills to the mix, you'll have to level up those mortals by using them in combat. Fortunately, your front row immortals can create a damage-reducing wall that protects your back-row mortals, which adds a new and interesting layer of strategy to the battles.

> "The battles feel more strategic around, mostly because Lost Odyssey delivers the challenge that was sorely lacking in Blue Dragon."

The battles feel more strategic around, mostly because Lost Odyssey delivers the challenge that was sorely lacking in Blue Dragon. Bosses are almost always threatening and even some non-boss encounters can be a serious threat. The higher level of difficulty isn't just apparent in battles, but in dungeons as well, where light puzzles and a series of imaginative gimmicks will keep your brain engaged. There's even a bonus dungeon built around the biggest brain-twister I've seen since the legendary Water Temple in The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time.

With its meandering story and limited innovations, Lost Odyssey feels more workmanlike than inspired. But there's no denying that it's an exceptionally well-made game, and that Mistwalker has delivered again on its mission of producing traditional Japanese RPGs with epic amounts of content and next-gen production values. If you're expecting a revolution, you may come away disappointed. But if you're a fan of the genre, you'll appreciate Lost Odyssey's exceptional craftsmanship from start to finish.

Lost Odyssey — score

+ Epic-length quest, solid battle system, great short stories

− Disappointing main-story development, lengthy load times

System(s)	Xbox 360
Developer	Mistwalker/feelPlus
Publisher	Microsoft
Online/Multi	No
ESRB Rating	T
Available	[illegible]

Dragon Quest Swords

The Masked Queen and the Tower of Mirrors

words: Dave Halverson

First Person Role Playing DQ Style

Business is business in the world of video games. If a console sells well—and the Wii is selling incredibly well—publishers have no choice but to take advantage of a good thing, as well they should. This creates somewhat of a conundrum when it comes to brands like Dragon Quest on the Wii. On the one hand Square Enix doesn't want to sully the brand coming off of arguably the strongest game in the series (DQ VIII Journey of the Cursed King on PS2), but on the other how can they afford not to create an adventure for Nintendo's killer app no matter how "casual gamer" based. The answer? A 10-12 hour rails first person RPG, quick to develop, easy to play and not all that demeaning to the fans.

Played completely with one hand, anchored to a single sparsely populated castle and village, DQS is a one-trick pony for sure, but nevertheless, given its brevity a fun little ride provided you can accept it for what it is, not what you wish it to be. Taking to the countryside, standing between you and each keep, you're literally on a fixed path. You can't look up, down, left, or right. What's in front of you looks great but it's all the Wii can render, so in order to preserve the visual the developers have locked us on a track. Faced with an enemy you stop and swing the Wiimote—slashing and blocking strategically. There's no arm to be seen; your companion may jump out to heal you but otherwise DQS's viewpoint is exactly that of Myst. Weird, I know. Dungeons offer the same. Should you come to a

"This is like an indie version of DQ—a sweet little aside between epics."

dead end, rather than turning you around to go back to the fork, they warp you back to avoid turning the camera .t's all very, very lim ted Now for the good st.ff The limited view does make for some impress ve environments and the character design is pure Toriyama go d. The fighting itself s a.so rather rewarding as the enemies become stronger and more tem management comes nto play Mindless Wiimote waggl.ng th.s isn't. The sword fighting slashing, lung ng, blocking and def ect ng—is very calculated The better you fight, the faster your Master-Stroke gauge fills up a lowing you to perform a Master Stroke (hey, just l ke the Queen song!), a move-specif c strike that does major damage and looks way-coo . The story is wr tten with all the cheeky regality you'd expect, the soundtrack is wholly enchanting, and subt e details like footsteps echo ng out of the W.imote remind you that you're experiencing the best Square Enix can sub-contract on a small sca e

Th s is like an indie version of DQ—a sweet l ttle as de between epics. Judged as such it's a rather engaging affair in a Shining in the Darkness sort of way Judged aga nst the likes of DQ VIII it pales completely, but g ven the p atform it's made for I can't find any reason to be overly harsh. It is what it is folks: a one-sitting rails DQ RPG for the masses

Dragon Quest Swords: The Masked Queen and the Tower of Mirrors

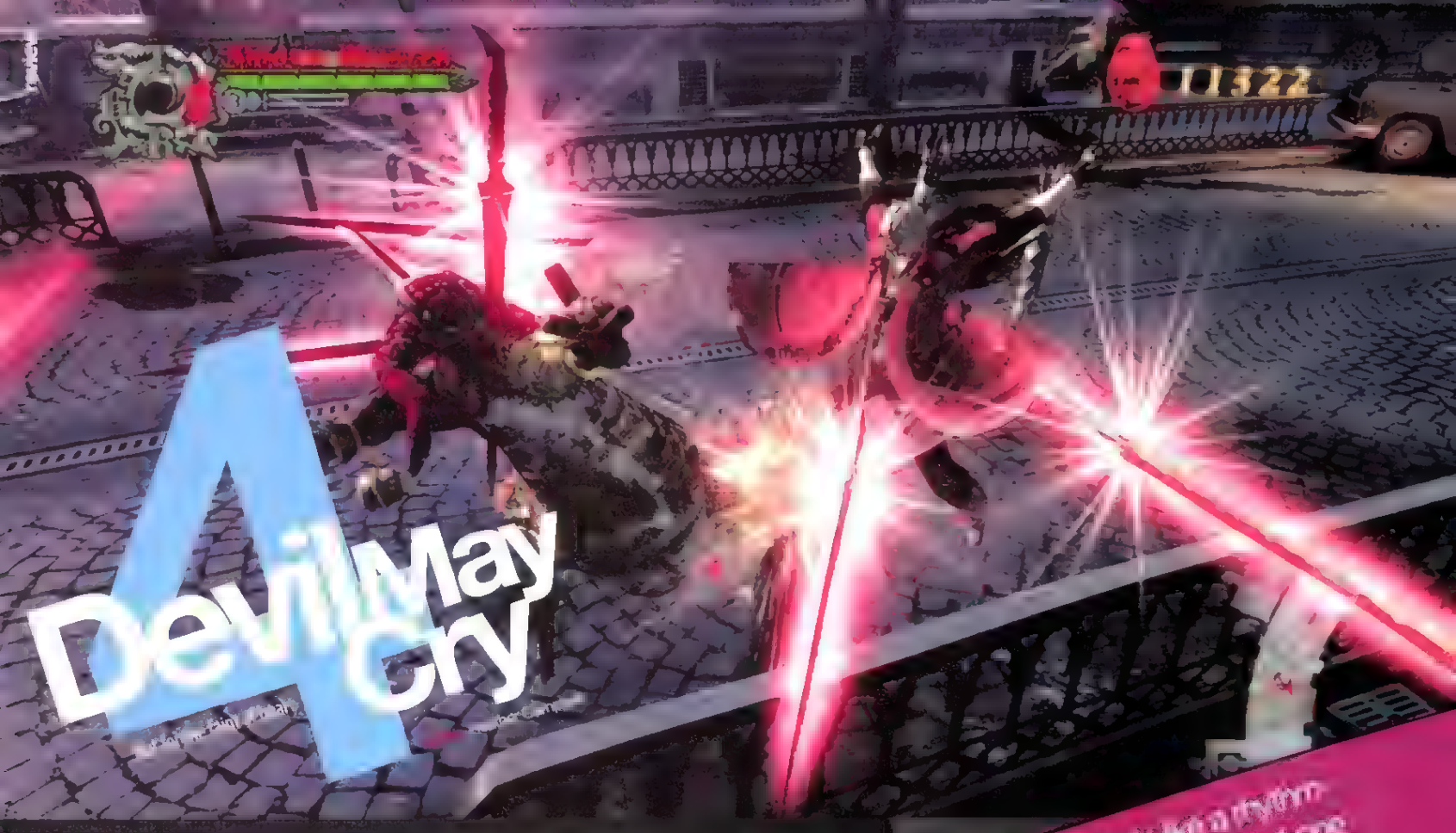
score

Great character des gn nice mode s nd beautifu

A ked down on rails n , dec ded y short and

System(s)	W
Developer	Eig ting
Publisher	Square Enix
Online Multi	NA
Available	February 20
ESRB Rating	Teen

Battling monsters requires great hair.



Devil May Cry 4

beautiful garbage. That's the first and most obvious impression that Devil May Cry 4 educes. The whole thing looks tasteless yet expensive—polished but tacky. It's a game about two white-haired men armed with swords, guns, devil-arms and transforming artillery briefcases; Capcom can't be keeping a straight face as they draft their press releases. Look at these ridiculous pleather-and-bones costume designs, echoed by the goth-punk architecture. The music, too, is ugly, well-produced electro-metal, punctuated by the sounds of our characters screaming "take this!" and "slam dunk!" Devil May Cry 4 is near nonsense. But that's Capcom's style, right?

It's a shame that the title takes itself so seriously for so long. With such an excess of absurdity, the game should be immediately giddy. But somewhere in the development, the script got stern. Nero's section of the game –and this isn't too harsh—is emo-trash. For the first six hours, Devil May Cry 4 is like watching a staged reading of an Anne Rice novel by a troupe of Live Action Role Players. It's uncomfortable, awkward stuff, and it's made even more peculiar by the satisfying satire included in the second half. Like contemplating a mash-up between an episode of Kindred: The Embraced and Godhand, the contrast between Nero's section and Dante's is a kind of unfathomable exercise. There are two games here, and two scripts. I would have enjoyed it more if I had just gotten to play the second one.

I bring up the script first because so much of this game is cutscenes. The ratio between playtime and downtime comes to about 3:1. The action is awesome and intuitive—as we've come to expect from DMC and Capcom. But between the inter-area loading screens (4–5 seconds each) and the cinema sequences, Devil May Cry 4 feels like riding a rollercoaster that stops every two minutes. Now, I've been told that the PS3 version loads faster. Couple that with the controller (the Xbox pad simply isn't right for the game: Right Bumper to lock-on to targets is crap), and I'm pretty sure which version I'll get when the game is released.

Yeah, that's right. I said I'm gonna get a

> "It feels like a rhythm action game, but one wherein you improvise the melodies as you go along. That, for me, is the sign of a great action system."

copy of the game when it comes out. For the PS3. Given the amount of complaining I've just done, maybe this comes as a surprise. Well, I haven't gotten to the good stuff yet. And the good stuff is the action.

When Devil May Cry 4 is controllable, the action flows viscerally. The best metaphor I can come up with to describe the feeling of the fights is *conducting*. DMC combat feels like you're conducting music, juggling between enemies to achieve those blissful combos. The button-pressing is specific, balanced. It feels like a rhythm-action game, but one wherein you improvise the melodies as you go along. That, for me, is the sign of a great action system. In some places, it's got the kind of crunch that Godhand had.

After fighting through enough levels, Nero (and eventually Dante) has a huge number of moves to choose from. The better a player you are—meaning, the speed with which you finish a level, the number secrets you discover, and the volume of blood orbs you collect—the more moves you can unlock for the heroes. Even better, Dante and Nero have unique and independent fighting styles, so the game plays one way going up, and a different way going down. Nero has his Devil Bringer arm, which lets you grapple-catch enemies from across the screen. Dante's four fighting styles (Gunslinger, Sword Master, Trickster, Royal Guard) return, and are selectable with the d-pad. Both gentlemen have gigantic swords and similar melee combos.

Frankly, with all of these combat options, I wish there was more fighting in Devil May Cry 4. See, in addition to the syrupy cut-scenes, too much of DMC4 is lame puzzle solving. You know—the kind that involves running to fetch four of the same vase to place on buttons to open a door. I guess you can't even call that puzzle solving. It's more like busy-work. When you find yourself spending hard-earned points to unlock the ability to *run faster* just so you can get through the puzzle solving portions in less time, well...that's a shame, right there. I should be spending those points on fighting moves, not running.

Still, it's a testament to the quality and playfulness of the combat that this score is so high. Despite the constant frustration of the stop-start gameplay, and the sheer humorless stupidity of the game's script in its first half, Devil May Cry 4 triumphs when you get to fight. The action is so much fun that I'd be happy just getting dropped in a room with endless spawning enemies—to see what I could pull off with limitless time and a variety of bad guys. There's a hint of this in certain special stages, where the combat is the focus. I just wish it could have been the focus of the rest of the game. Still, you can't judge a game by the game you imagine when you're playing it. Or can you?

Devil May Cry 4

score

System(s)	
Developer	
Publisher	
Online/Multi	
Available	
ESRB Rating	

No Heroes

words Heather Campbell

It is a real shame that No More Heroes isn't doing better business in Japan. It may be the second-best game on the Wii. It's certainly the most stylish, provocative, and compelling title on the system. Developed by Grasshopper Manufacture (known for their meta-game Killer7), No More Heroes is suffering from sluggish sales because... well, maybe most Wii owners aren't gamers. Maybe the back stock has been cleared out by moms and children and that hip nephew everybody has—the one who owns one of everything. That nephew's not a gamer, either. He has Wii Sports for parties, and owns a copy of Super Mario Galaxy because it's Mario. No More Heroes is gonna slip by him, because the game was designed with gamers in mind, whatever that means.

For the game players out there, No More Heroes is loud and fun. It's got rough punk edges because there's not a lot of budget behind the title, and because Suda 51 (the man of GHM) declares on his company card "PUNK'S NOT DEAD"—an anti-apology for the weird, somehow unfinished choices of his games. No More Heroes is hilarious violence, gangly dialogue, and winks.

Travis Touchdown is our star in No More Heroes. Angry, young, and poor, he wins an online auction for a Beam Katana and takes up assassination as a way to make easy money. In Travis' simple world, money=girls, and by the look of his apartment, he hasn't gotten laid in a long time.

Travis is an American otaku with a sharp fashion sense. He drives a ridiculous bike through the city of Santa Destroy—a California nightmare of empty buildings and abandoned streets. Superficially, this is a parody of Grand Theft Auto—but with further examination, Santa Destroy's emptiness is a reflection of the hollow content of most game overworlds. I think. To me, Travis isn't exploring a city; he's traversing a giant menu system between the few choices he has in his life. Drink, train, shop, kill. Or take on a demeaning part-time job from a creepy guy in a hoodie.

Travis progresses towards being the number one ranked assassin by killing all of the other hitmen in town. To take on a challenger, he's got to have enough money to unlock the next match. Travis can find money on the ground, by digging with his Beam Katana, or he can take on freelance assassination missions (which take the shape of time-attack levels or frustrating one-hit-kills-you zones), or he can contact that aforementioned hooded fellow and work part-time chores in the form of a minigame.

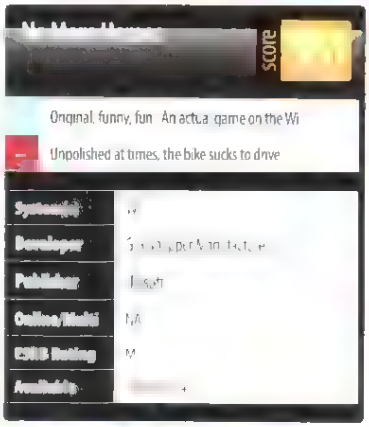
No More Heroes is telling us that minigames are boring by putting our button-presses into the context of these really shallow third-rate jobs. We can pretend that we're simulating an adventure, but as far as our hands are concerned, we might as well be mowing the lawn. The psychological divorce between button-presses and their representative actions is pretty complete. As long as you're pressing buttons to make more money, why not have Travis collect kittens or scrub graffiti? It's a minigame, says Grasshopper, so it's stupid. Luckily, the major game is built around boss battles, and these deliver. The combat system of No More Heroes is a-button mashing, b-button deflecting, defensive based action. On Better

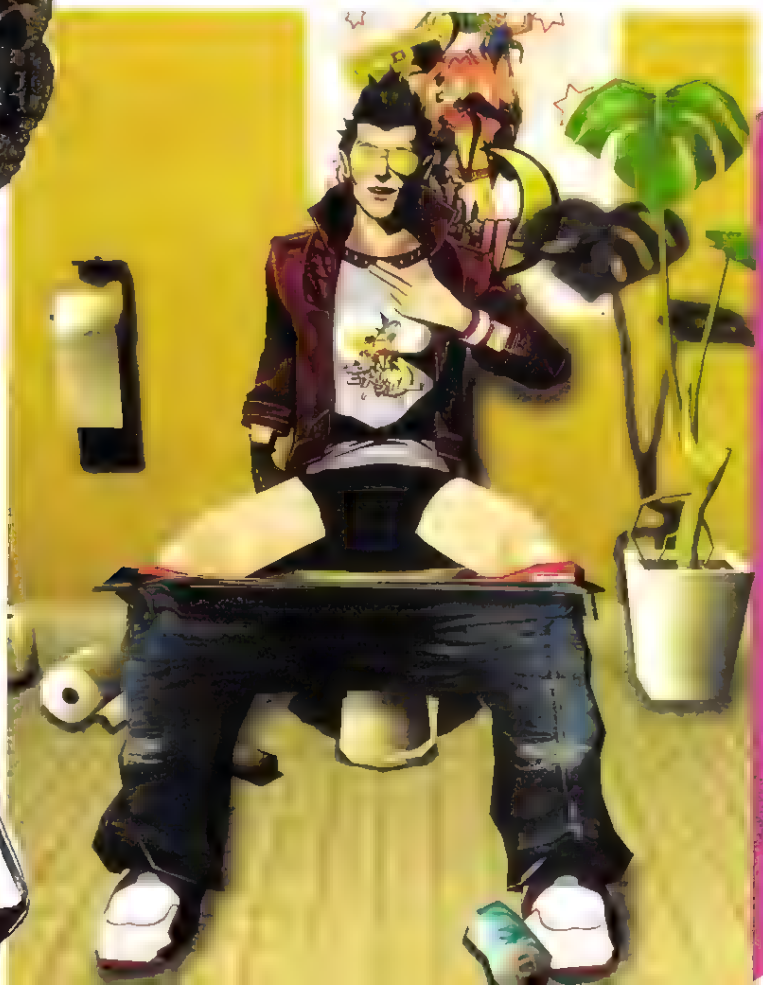
"In Travis' simple world, money=girls, and by the look of his apartment, he hasn't gotten laid in a long time."

mode, slowly figuring out an enemy's patterns and then exploiting their weaknesses, is patient, pensive stuff. Some of the fights take as long as a half-hour; the game's most subtle way of telling its audience, "this isn't casual." Combat against standard enemies is simple and jolly. After wearing down a villain with regular attacks, you're directed to swish the Wiimote in a random direction. Cutting through this crowd of bad guys after slashing your Wii Wand fills the screen with blood, coins, and black smoke. The bad guys yell out "my spleen!" or something like that, and we laugh.

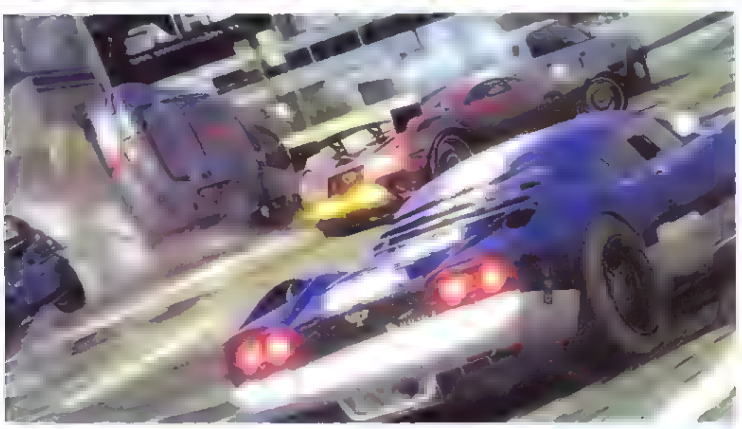
Broadly, No More Heroes is in love with games, and game conventions. From 8-bit icons, a miserable HUD map system, to chip-tunes mini-songs, the game speaks in Game. This is not a title to introduce someone to video games with. This is a game for gamers to play, because it's tossing out in-jokes constantly. Without spoiling anything, the entire ending of NMH screams, "GAME!" in a shrill sophomoric voice.

Now, there's a lot about this game that doesn't work, and it's hard to tell what is truly broken, versus which parts Suda's team has chosen to cripple. This might be the greatest success of the Grasshopper style; by defining themselves as a video game *band*, of all things, they can easily sidestep criticism by saying, "so what?" It's not the most mature choice, but is acceptable because of the arrogance of so many of No More Heroes' set pieces. It's derivative, stark, and brash. But the game succeeds because of its swagger.





Burnout Paradise



Road rage at a neat 60 frames per second is a wonderful thing.

Burnout Paradise represents a paradigm shift for the popular driving game series. Instead of a series of self-contained challenges, Paradise offers up an open world where players are free to explore their inner vehicular homicidal maniac to their hearts' content. Developer Criterion took a tremendous chance in moving to an open world; the game's original formula, which emphasized individual contests and offered no exploration, won it much acclaim. The Burnout series, simply, was fast and fun, and there really wasn't a need for it to move beyond its races, demolition derbies, and wild stunt contests.

Yet this shift to the open world works very well. Simply, Burnout has not lost its self-contained challenges, and remains a delightfully crashtastic adventure that can be enjoyed in frantic 10-minute bursts. It's just now the game challenges drivers to hit the open road, to seek the adventures they want, and to explore a big city that can be plowed through at suicidal speeds.

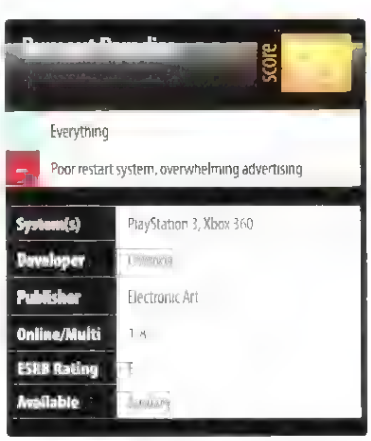
> "Simply, Burnout has not lost its self-contained challenges, and remains a delightfully crashtastic adventure that can be enjoyed in frantic, 10-minute bursts..."

The game's fictional Paradise City—named for a Guns 'n' Roses song—sprawls and hops. It comes laden with twisting highways, scenic coastal roads, bridges, and tunnels. It measures some 30 square kilometers, according to Electronic Arts, and has been built as a kind of motorist's wet dream. Secret paths abound, and Paradise makes an entire minigame out of smashing through barricades to get to them. There's also an insane amount of ramps from which to launch a car, say, through a strategically placed Burnout billboard.

There's a great deal of fun to be had just cruising through Paradise City, finding its hidden nooks and crannies. Tiered parking lots are goldmines for drivers looking to perform crazy stunts and jumps. A baseball stadium's playing field provides the perfect place for doing donuts. Bridges in Paradise City are frequently washed out to create super jump opportunities, and Burnout punctuates each of these Dukes of Hazzard moments with freeze-frame and stylized still images of the jump.

Marked intersections hold various challenges such as straightforward races, destructive road rage contests, stunt competitions, and "marked man" sprints where a player must avoid getting wrecked by the competition. It's here the game puts up its most notable flaw: players simply cannot restart failed challenges immediately as was the case in previous Burnout titles. If a player loses a race or has his car destroyed, he has to drive back to the challenge's starting point to begin anew. This is particularly daunting during burning road races—where a player races against the clock to a finish line—because these challenges are specific to an individual car.

Electronic Arts uses Burnout as an advertiser's canvas, too, and players can expect to be assaulted with ads as they tear through Paradise. It's an indignity to smash headlong into a van at excessive speeds. It's an affront to mankind to smash into a Gillette Razor van, even if the scene is made all the cooler by a slow-motion crash where glass shatters, steel bends, and pieces go flying—delightfully everywhere.



Unlimited Adventure

"...the perfect fodder for an exuberant, never-a-dull-moment video game excursion."

Dave Halverson

After its kid-friendly debut a few years back (neutered considerably for the Kids WB, Toonam , etc.) *One Piece* has returned in ts original risque state with a new mov e from FUNimation and the best adventure game for the Wi this side of Zelda. Th ngs get underway after Luffy (Monkey D Luffy that is, whose greatest ambition is to find the ultimate treasure One Piece and become pirate king) finds a strange orb while f shing off the stern of their colorful pirate ship that gives rise to an island cha n harnessing more secrets than a CIA hard drive. Thinking there must be treasure to be had the Straw Hat Pirates make camp (which becomes the game's ample hub) and set out to comb every inch of the sun-drenched paradise

Progression in the game comes by way of activat ng the orb to unlock sealed barriers, opening new areas to d scover more and more c ues and items to what amounts to a ginormous topographical riddle. The gist of the game is collecting resources from the island to power each orb—a pretty clear-cut exercise collecting herbs, rocks, bones, crystals, fru t and so on, that gives way to a massive scavenger hunt the deeper you go... Once you fashion the p ckaxe you can reach the area to make a net so you can begin to collect indigenous bugs, wh.ch help open areas where you might find items to create a fishing pole, stove, develop an anti-toxin, and so on. There's a ma,or creation component to the game, returning to camp to cook up medicines and build usefu items to help open your way. Each area also houses regenerating rogue pirates of all shapes and sizes, creat.ng the game's ntuitive fighting component and a main seal for each area which, when broken, reveals one of the gang's memories and a former foe who materializes for a due to the death (boss encounters). Al. the while the entire Straw Hat Gang is at your fingert ps (once you find them all after the shipwreck). Switching characters to best f t each s tuation is another high-po.nt .n the game, giving you eight lives to extinguish every time you set out from camp The more you use a given character the more moves they learn too, so it's wise to play the field (yes, even Chopper I'm afraid) Essentia.ly what you've got here is a mass've Metroid/Zelda type adventure with a major creation component driven by the kind of sticky Japanese soundtrack we were all weaned on, exceptional Wiimote controls, and excellent visuals ta.lor made to take advantage of the Wii's capabi ities.

This one is des gned from the ground up for Wii and it really shows. I'd put it with the console's ten best The versus fighting component alone is better than most an me-based fighting games and it's merely an add-on. The game is also ong, very, very long, but not long-winded. One P ece s a gloriously over-the-top show f lled w th Buxom charlatans and freakish buccaneers—the perfect fodder for an exuberant, never-a-dul -moment video game excurs on

One Piece Unlimited Adveture

score

A massive adventure with exploration and creation galore that love you long time. Great OST

Graphics—though good for Wi aren t up to "next generation" standards

System(s)	Wi
Developer	Ganbarion
Publisher	Namco Banda
Online/Multi	1 player ver
Available	February
ESRB Rating	Teen

The Club

Membership revoked...

words Greg Orlando

Split-screen multi-player mayhem with dozens...

Coach "Guts" Scerbo was harder than a steel girder. It was his goal in life to make young children run laps. In searing heat. Laps. In freezing cold. Laps. During thunderous rainstorms: Laps. Inside the gymnasium. The man was a fiend for running in circles. It was his true calling.

The Club is the video game for Coach "Guts" Scerbo, and for all hardened steel gym teachers out there who delight in making the other guy run around.

For the rest of humanity, The Club is achingly average, a game with a decent concept that, efficiently enough, runs itself in circles.

Players take the role of a new inductee into The Club, a violent organization based upon the premise that it's really neat to have hardened killers run laps. Most challenges involve a sprint to a finish line and quite a few of these require multiple trips around a course.

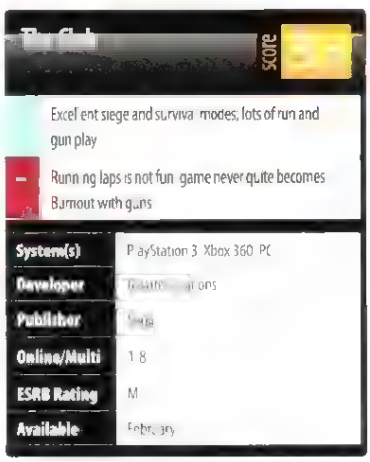
The developers have attempted to recreate the frantic, balls-out excitement of the driving game Burnout here. A combination meter fills up when players make a kill or shoot a special target, and then quickly begins to tick down. The more kills in succession, the higher the game's multiplier goes, and the more points are racked up.

There's certainly some moderate thrill to be had racing around, scoring multiple kills, busting off headshots, and keeping the combination meter revving, but The Club lacks the simple reward structure of Burnout. In Burnout, players were rewarded for wrecking other cars with a boost of speed and a tremendously satisfying little cut-scene showing a car violently barreling into an obstacle - complete with shattering glass, crumpled hoods, and an explosion of flying parts. Minus that little bonus for its destruction, The Club rapidly becomes a third-person shoot-'em-up largely concerned with psychopaths running laps.

To its credit, the game features some wonderful challenges where players must stay within the boundaries of a given space and, simply, survive an onslaught of attackers. Here, the game throws tons of enemies at the player's character and, all the better, puts most of the health-restoring bonuses outside of the safe zone. Players must then race outside the marked boundaries and hustle back; a five-second grace period is granted, and explosive death is a given beyond that. It's only here that The Club shows its maniacal best. It's unfortunate, however, that these challenges are not more highly emphasized.

Multiplayer action offers no real surprises. The action online is certainly passable, but there's nothing here to hook players. Expect standard deathmatches, hide-and-seek competitions, and so forth.

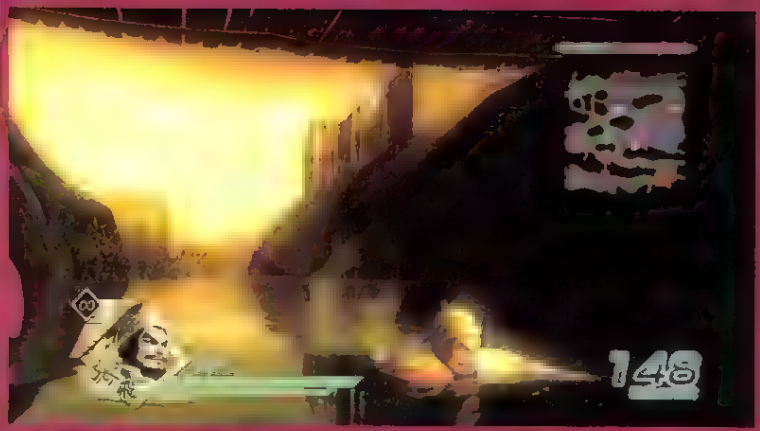
This is one club people might not want to join.


The Club
score
Excellent siege and survival modes, lots of run and gun play
Running laps is not fun. game never quite becomes Burnout with guns
System(s) PlayStation 3 Xbox 360 PC
Developer
Publisher
Online/Multi 1-8
ESRB Rating M
Available

Dynasty Warriors 6

3.2 GHz of red-hot ladder-climbing action

words: Casey Loe



"The battlefields have been expanded with more depth and terrain variety, including climbable ladders, fordable water, and destructible fortifications."

The switch to next-gen platforms has finally brought change to the long-stagnant Dynasty Warriors series. The battlefields have been expanded with more depth and terrain variety, including climbable ladders, fordable water, and destructible fortifications. The combo system has been remade from scratch, and all of the characters have new move lists, skill trees, and motion-captured animations. And all in all, DW6 looks quite nice: it skips some frames here and there but pushes a lot of polygons in its massive melees.

All of these changes are for the better and offer just the right mix of complexity and variety to make DW6 accessible and interesting to newcomers and lapsed fans. But existing fans aren't going to be so easily impressed; DW6 has a relatively small roster of characters, cutting out a lot of old favorites and making no real additions besides some uninspired texture-swap clones. There are less than 20 stages, and while they're large and quite packed with variety, it isn't anywhere near enough to give each of the storyline characters a different-feeling quest. Long-awaited upgrades like online co-op are still nowhere to be found.

Dynasty Warriors 6 has a perfectly adequate amount of content compared to other next-gen games in the war-brawl genre, like, say, Ninety-Nine Nights and Kingdom Under Fire: Circle of Doom. But there's no denying that it has a lot less content than Dynasty Warriors 5. That's not so surprising: obviously it takes a lot of work to make an entirely new engine, and to redo all the textures and animations. But DW6 does feel sort of lightweight, especially at a $60 price tag. It's great to see the aging Dynasty Warriors engine get a contemporary upgrade, and DW6 certainly looks nice and plays well. But I can't shake the feeling that this is merely the prologue disc to a more full-featured Dynasty Warriors title that is right around the corner.

Dynasty Warriors 6 — SCORE 7.0

The new engine brings several welcome upgrades

Less content than previous installments, still no online co-op

System(s)	PS3, Xbox 360
Developer	Omega Force
Publisher	Koei
Online/Multi	2 player co-op offline
ESRB Rating	Teen
Available	10/2008

Lost Planet: Extreme Conditions

score

Lost & Found

words Brady Fiechter

System(s)	PS3	**Multi**	1-16
Developer	Capcom	**Available**	February 26
Publisher	Capcom	**ESRB Rating**	T

You can see it in Capcom's other earnestly entertaining action game Devil May Cry 4, even more so, that enunciated sense of design stuck in the past, struggling to find relevance against the continual rise of western influences. For someone who has played games beyond the last decade, and can understand and respect what is worth holding onto, Lost Planet: Extreme Conditions is respectable gamemaking.

Early on, it comes off exciting and bold, the arctic setting a fun place to blast away at some fantastically designed creatures that explode from underneath the snowcover and fly in masses through interesting cave structures. The mechanic never really shows full potential, but casting out a grappling line to dislodge enemies and zip up to higher terrain is a kick.

One of the ways Lost Planet begins to lose its grip is in its lack of contrast and disinterest in mixing up the action enough. The game drops you into vital suits periodically, but these mech-like vehicles are more of a detriment than anything else, fracturing the swift energy that's been established in the on-foot shooting bits.

Complaints were waged against the dumb-AI human element when Lost Planet was introduced on Xbox 360 last year, but here's one area that with the proper frame of reference, can be enjoyed if you like sinking into pattern-based gameplay.

There are some great scenes staged in Lost Planet: Extreme Conditions, and if you haven't been introduced to this well-crafted world on Xbox 360, the 40 dollar price point this time out is worth the cash for gamers who especially appreciate the Japanese aesthetic.

Nitrobike

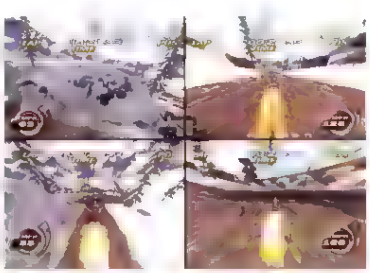
score

Vertigo Posse

words Dave Halverson

System(s)	Wii	**Multi**	1-4 player
Developer	Left Field Productions	**Available**	January
Publisher	Ubisoft	**ESRB Rating**	T

I wonder at what point Left Field Productions (best known for Excitebike 64 and MTX Mototrax) decided to go completely off the reservation and develop the circus-act of a racer that is Nitrobike. Featuring bikes that look like a cross between something they came up with at the Dyson factory and an old Hodaka and riders resembling rejects from the Thunderdome, this is one bizarro game. The latest in the burgeoning quiver of Wiimote tilt racers, Nitrobike features a mishmash of race types (timing, hoop challenges, eliminators etc.) spread over a series of traditional "Cups." The cross pad is your boost, 1 is your gas and 2 is your brake. This is not Burger King, you cannot have it your way: it's tilt control or nothing along with a single camera angle. Somehow this mad-alchemy of a racer totally works. I can already hear the haters ragging on it but if you're down with the whole motion thing (someone really ought to fashion some Wiimote handlebars), Nitrobike is big on fun. Once you hit the game's rhythm it's all downhill. It's also one of the console's better looking games in terms of textures. As for the bikes and riders, well they kinda grow on you. Like a wart you don't wanna pick.



Final Fantasy

words Heather Campbell

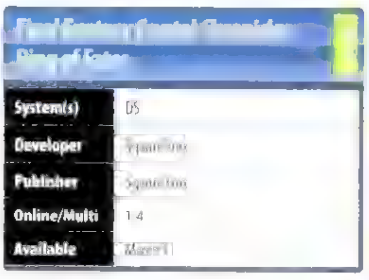
Except me.

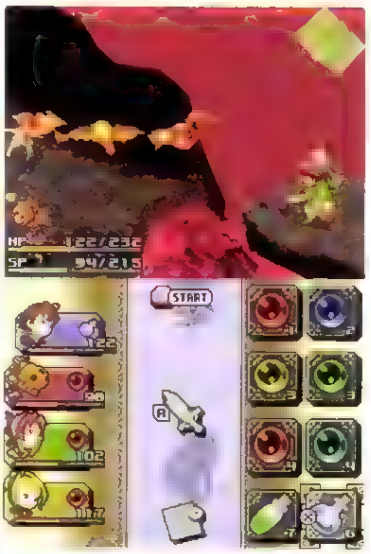
With only one copy of Crystal Chronicles, it's impossible to evaluate the multiplayer combat of the game. If it's as balanced as the single-player mode, it should be a lot of fun. More fun, n fact, because the game is probably focused more squarely on combat. Put t this way, the solo campaign is aimed at children. The s mple, silly story and chirpy vo ce-acting p ays out like a storybook, not an adventure Remember when 8-b t games could be played by adults or children? Gauntlet is for everyone Why are developers so intent on making stories for kids when they could write dungeon-action games for anyone?

Anyway, it's time for another Crystal Chronicles game The series is now two games deep, and we are beginning to see the elements which define the tit es: co-operation, character des gn, and music by the amazing Kumi Tanioka. The new DS Crysta Chronicles game follows the story of two young sibl ngs, Yuri and Chel nka, who have a mysterious destiny! In the solo campaign, Yuri takes his father's hatchet in hand and sets out to find treasure, with his magical sister in tow.

Eventually, your party is made of four players, and you switch between them by selecting them on the touch screen. Each character has their own strengths, and together you head through the dungeons collect ng gear, money, and food. With special attacks specific to each character, tak ng on a boss is an exerc se in juggl ng combat and support magic. It's a little bit ike playing an MMO by yourself, wh ch may be the best way to play an MMO

I feel a little bit unfair judg ng a game so clearly designed for mu.tiplayer fighting on its solo campaign alone. If you have friends with DSs, drop the game in and fight together. It's likely to be a better title, like the GameCube game before it





Final Fantasy

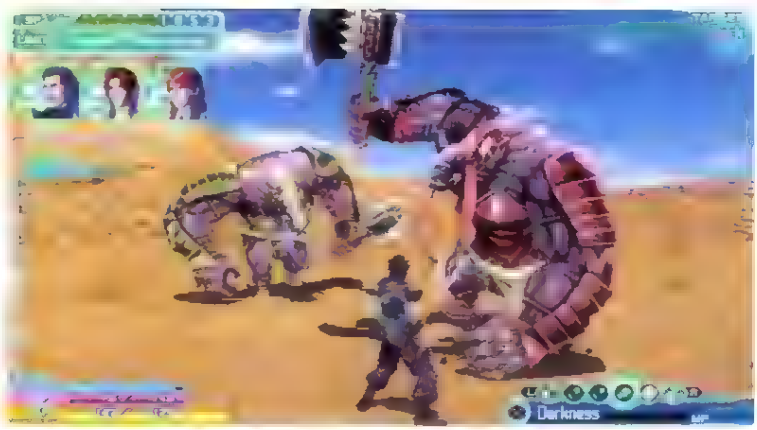
Let's be real, kids. The Compilation of Final Fantasy VII project never really quite delivered, did it? Leaving aside for the moment the fact that futzing with a work as legendary as FFVII was tomfoolery in the first place, everything birthed by the Project was complete mediocrity. The best thing you can say about Advent Children, Before Crisis and Dirge of Cerberus is that they didn't outright *suck*. Well, friends, Crisis Core: Final Fantasy VII is almost here...and the *worst* thing you can say about it is that it rocks.

Although this is technically just a preview, I've already spent some seventy hours with the Japanese version of the game. It is therefore with total confidence that I can tell you Crisis Core is not only the best product in the Compilation, it is also the best PSP game yet made. Yeah, dig it. In late March, Square Enix is bringing you the PSP's promise made real: console-quality gaming in the palm of your hand. What a cliché, right? The PSP has had a fair share of titles that can legitimately be termed "console-quality"—Daxter and Ratchet come to mind—but nothing on this level. If those games were console-quality, Crisis Core is *triple-A* console-quality, of the type only Square's internal studios are capable of producing.

A simpler way to put it? Crisis Core is Final Fantasy quality. And I'm not talking spinoff; I'm talking numbered series. Dirge of Cerberus hinted at that classic level of post-1997 FF polish with its stunning cutscenes and epic sweep, but this game—developed internally by the core team that brought you FFVII, VIII, X, X-2, the upcoming XIII—is Final Fantasy on every level. The trademark Square Production Team 1 luster extends to gameplay, design, music, and—most essentially—story.

FFVII (and VIII, and X) was written by Kazushige Nojima. Being familiar with his work in the original Japanese (as well as in Alexander O. Smith's wonderful translation), I have long considered him the best screenwriter in the Japanese game industry. If Hideo Kojima writes to the head, Nojima writes to the heart. I can't remember a single line of dialogue Kojima ever wrote, only the greater arcs of his stories. In Nojima's case, however, it is characterization and dialogue that delivers those moments that live in memory forever. Who can forget Yuna's final line of FFX, or Sephiroth's crushing analysis of Cloud's psyche in FFVII? Nojima writes *character*, and with Crisis Core, he has written the script of his life.

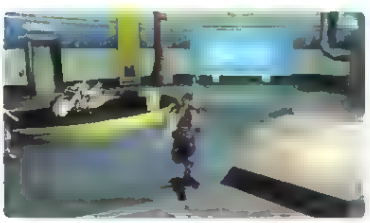
The thing about this game is...you know how it's going to end. Even if you've never played FFVII in your life, the sheer iconic status of that work dictates that you probably know protagonist Zack's ultimate fate. How do you write a

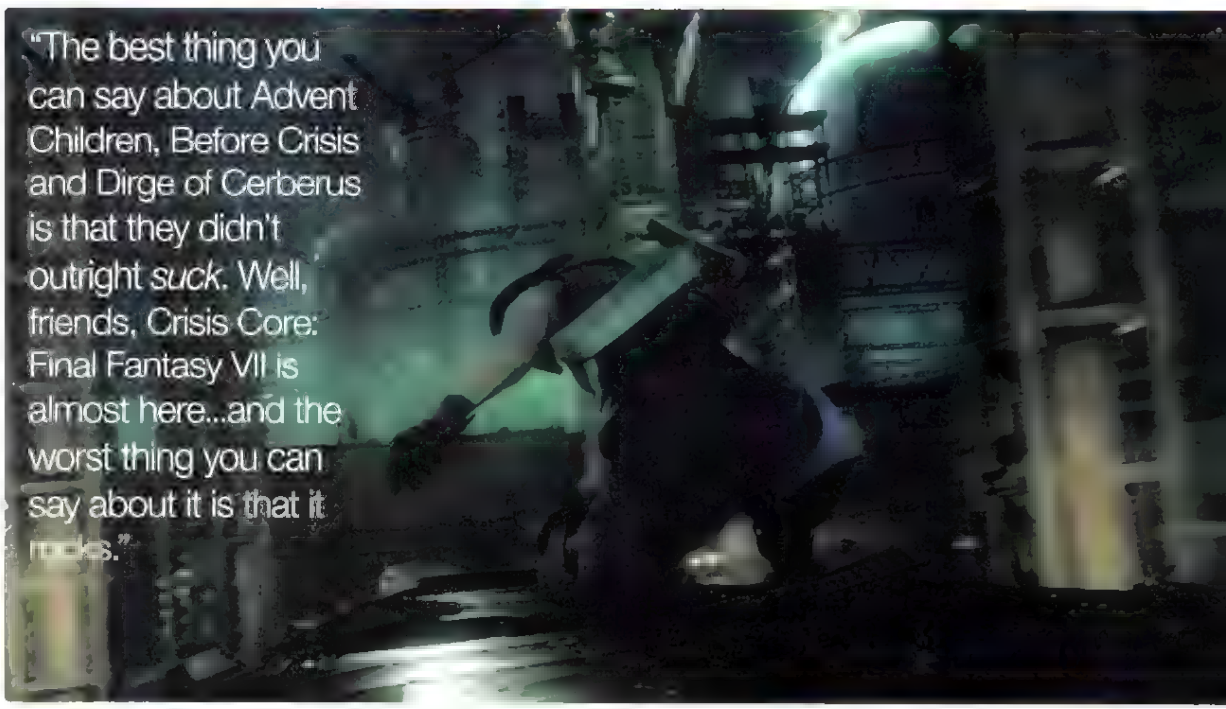


compelling story when every last gamer on Earth already knows exactly how things will play out? If you're Kazushige Nojima, you conjure up the most likable protagonist in Final Fantasy history from virtually nothing (the Zack we know from previous entries in the series was practically a phantom) and set him on a dramatic path that, moment by moment, hour by hour, makes his inevitable fate that much more heartbreaking.

I want to be purposefully oblique about Crisis Core's story, which begins seven years prior to the events of FFVII and ends just before its chronological start, because it will be best experienced knowing nothing. You can expect major supporting turns from Sephiroth, Aerith, Cloud, and many other beloved characters, but never in a way that feels shoehorned in or inorganic. Nojima's story is miraculously respectful of timeline and canon, and never attempts any hamfisted "retconning." Such a remarkable narrative is all the more impressive given how weak other Compilation efforts were, and it stands perhaps as the most effective Final Fantasy story *ever* from a dramatic standpoint. I will say no more, save to say that there will be a river of man-tears wept all across the nation when people begin to beat this game.

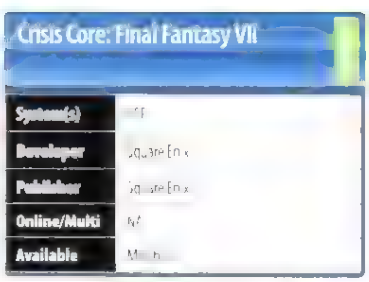
Pleasantly, that will last a good long time. A standard playthrough will take about thirty hours, and it took me seventy to do the traditional "everything." That would be a good long time for any J-RPG, but Crisis Core is in fact an action RPG a belt unlike one you've ever played before.

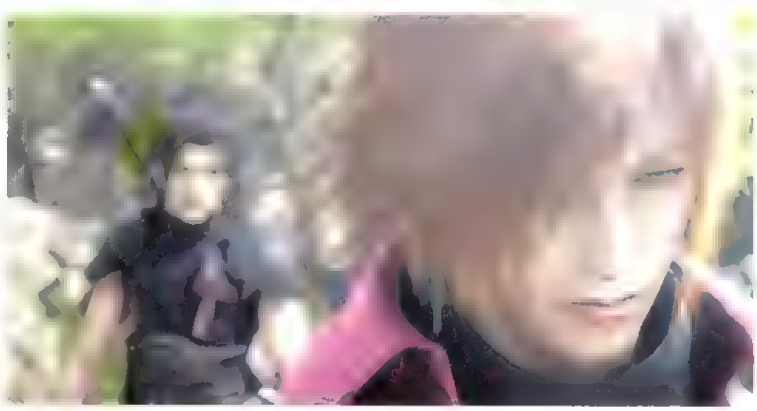



"The best thing you can say about Advent Children, Before Crisis and Dirge of Cerberus is that they didn't outright *suck*. Well, friends, Crisis Core: Final Fantasy VII is almost here...and the worst thing you can say about it is that it rocks."

The formula might be described in a ratio of 3:3.3:1, those parts in order consisting of standard Final Fantasy Active Time Battle, Final Fantasy XII Active Dimension Battle, Kingdom Hearts, and Devil May Cry. Encounters are random but seamless, and the battles themselves are perhaps the best fusion of realtime and turn-based combat yet attempted. No game is without its flaws, of course, and the Japanese version of Crisis Core had its fair share. The most significant of these was a massive difficulty disparity between story battles your infirm grandmother could beat blindfolded, and the 300 hair-splitting, harsh optional missions designed for on-the-go play.

With expansive and welcome difficulty enhancements made to the American versions of Dirge of Cerberus and Final Fantasy XII: Revenant Wings, however, Square Enix has proven its willingness to address such issues in a market that demands more challenge than the Japanese lowest common denominator. Another pressing issue that may affect the localization is translation and voice acting, as some of the antagonist Genesis's language is extremely poetic and may simply not transition into English very well. All of this still remains to be seen, so please look forward to our review of the complete English version next month. However those cards may fall, with a game this singularly fantastic–even as it stands in the Japanese release–I want you to know this. Whatever happens with the English version, the Compilation is finally going to deliver. And it's going to do so spectacularly.





Jackass the Game

score

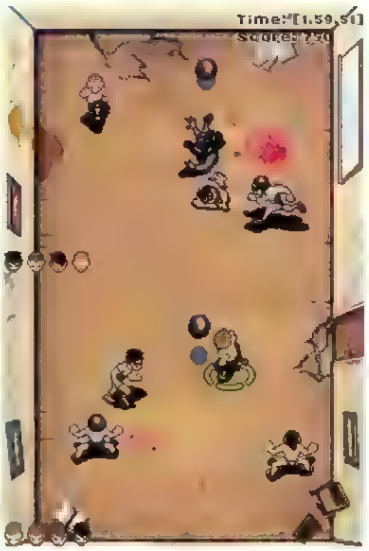
System(s)	Nintendo DS	**Multi**	NA
Developer	Sensory Sweep	**Available**	January
Publisher	Red Mile Entertainment	**ESRB Rating**	T

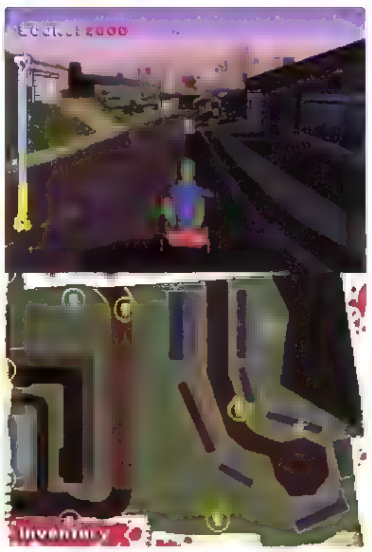
If you're ever wondering how high shit can be stacked, take a look at Jackass the Game, a bleary, depressing, craptastic "adventure" based on a bleary, depressing, craptastic TV show.

Graphically, the game is a blocky turd, with "shapes" that might be interpreted to be buildings, people, roads, vehicles, etc. Its sound samples consist almost entirely of "URRRRGGGGH!" which plays when a character bumps or smashes into anything, up to and including what appears to be a plastic safety traffic cone. Its humor consists of feces jokes, but certainly not the kind anyone might chuckle at and, after the fact, feel embarrassed at having done so.

To its great credit, Jackass graciously allows players to create their own character, such as a powder-blue tuxedo-wearing dwarf with a mullet. It is for this reason alone that Jackass is redeemed from scoring an absolute zero out of 10 on the Play review scale.

Anyway, the goal here is to impress a bunch of nerdlingers by performing feats of derring-do resulting in grievous bodily harm. Frankly, buying the game and inserting its cartridge into the DS should be more than sufficient for this task. Do that and, well, a Jackass is you. **Greg Orlando**





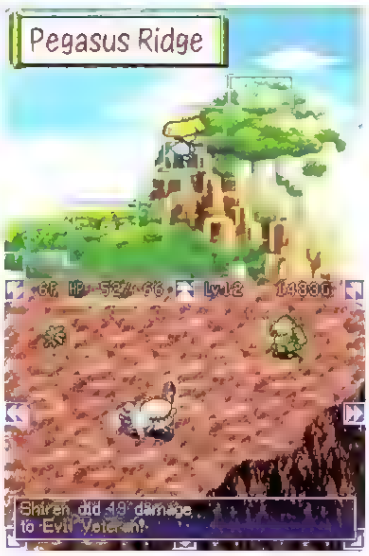
Mystery Dungeon: Shiren the Wanderer

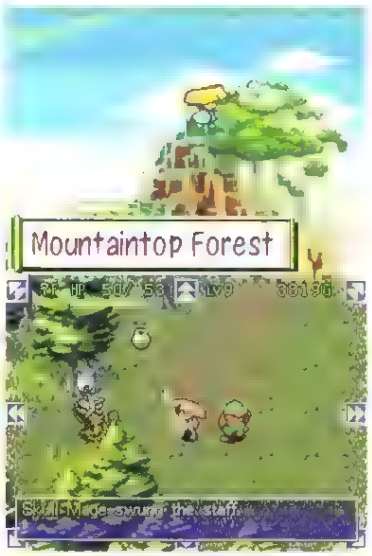
System(s)	Nintendo DS	**Multi**	NA
Developer	Chunsoft	**Available**	March 4
Publisher	Sega	**ESRB Rating**	E

A *"roguelike"* is a game featuring randomly generated dungeons, wherein players engage turn-based battles and accumulate treasure. Typically difficult, the joy of these games comes from the successes of combat and the quiet status of victory. Roguelikes are cult games, with small and extremely loyal fanbases.

Chunsoft has been making roguelikes for a while now. Released under the umbrella title Mystery Dungeon (or Mysterious Dungeon), Chunsoft has been churning these games out since the Famicom days. They're not especially popular here in the states. If you're familiar with them, it's probably because of Pikachu. You know, Pokemon's Mystery Dungeon. Or that other yellow hero, Chocobo.

But here's our first chance to play a Mystery Dungeon proper. Based on the Super Famicom game, the DS update is the first time American players will get a chance to grind their teeth on the random, difficult, and satisfying battles of the Chunsoft title. Knowing that the game is unfamiliar, Chunshoft has seen fit to include a tutorial mode, so that a whole new generation of players can shriek at the screen. **Heather Campbell**





Apollo Justice: Ace Attorney

score

System(s)	Nintendo DS	Multi	NA
Developer	Capcom	Available	February
Publisher	Capcom	ESRB Rating	T

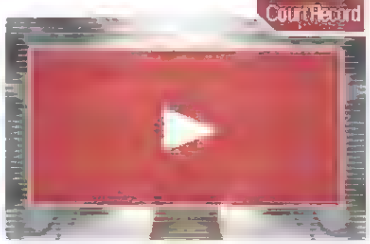
She's replaced Phoenix Wright in the DS's Ace Attorney series because, apparently, it's good to substitute one clueless, spiky-haired lawyer for another every now and again. Courtroom drama gets a mostly new cast here, and the change for change's sake doesn't particularly elevate this adventure game.

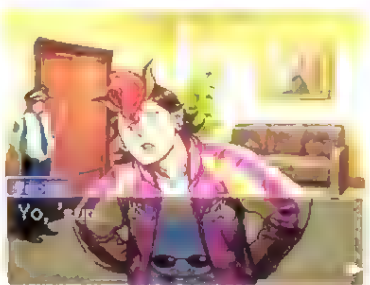
Anyway, this time Justice isn't blind; the new character's defining ability is to see nervous twitches in witnesses, and exploit them to uncover contradictions in a witness' testimony. It's fairly silly and unwieldy to use—players must not only locate the erratic movements but also focus in on the body part in question—but has the virtue of replacing the old "spirit lock" system which involved ace attorney Phoenix Wright using evidence to break a series of mystical chains to uncover someone's tightly guarded secret.

A 3D crime-site re-creation system also comes into play here, allowing for the manipulation of objects and witnesses. Credit must go to someone for its creation; it makes Justice feel more like C.S.I. than it does Whose Line is it Anyway?—at least before the game sinks to its excessively yappy, oftentimes embarrassingly super-goofy self. Hunting for women's panties, anyone?

Plead nolo contendere.

Apollo. **Greg Orlando**

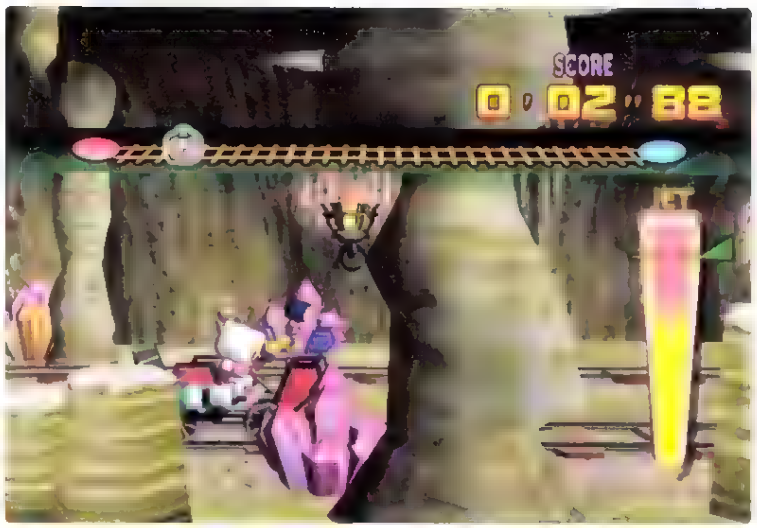




Bomberman Land

score

System(s)	PSP	Multi	1-4 player adhoc
Developer	Hudson Soft	Available	January
Publisher	Hudson Soft	ESRB Rating	E



Video game characters, much like us humans who create and control them, seem to get bored of their chosen professions after a while, craving something new and different to spice up their lives.

Unfortunately, in his boredom, Bomberman decided his dream was to star in his very own collection of minigames. I don't mind the concept—the brilliance of the WarioWare series brings me joy to this very day—but it's an idea that is hard to pull off well. Bomberman Land asks players to unlock the 50+ minigames it presents via a single player mode that amounts to little more than a scavenger hunt, where challenge is mostly in finding the right place to go next. The procedure is more tedious than fun, and the payoff is a handful of minigames that are genuinely fun and addicting, but far too many that aren't.

Where Bomberman Land completely turns things around is in its other half, the tried-and-true multiplayer battle mode. Battle mode isn't as fully featured as it really should be—I mean, jelly bombs with no throw glove, that's just crazy—but there are some seriously cool match styles that I've never seen in a (U.S.-released) Bomberman title before: things like "wobble" blocks, which bounce around the screen, adding a wonderfully chaotic element to matches, and the Star Battle, so perfectly genius for multiplayer sessions with friends that it needs to be in every version of Bomberman from here on out. **Eric L. Patterson**

Dungeon Explorer

score

System(s)	Nintendo DS	**Multi**	1-3 player WiFi
Developer	Hudson Soft	**Available**	February
Publisher	Hudson Entertainment	**ESRB Rating**	E

While its PSP sibling chose to go down a more hardcore route gameplay-wise, Dungeon Explorer for the DS isn't quite as deep, eschewing character creation for a selection of pre-crafted heroes combined with pacing and gameplay that lean more toward the arcadey roots of the original TurboGrafx-16 cult classic. Unfortunately, while the intimidation that comes along with many a dungeon crawler is lacking here, so too is an overall sense of polish: control and combat are just too stiff, and character and monster sprites are thoroughly bland. Online multiplayer, on the other hand, was a most welcome surprise. **Eric L. Patterson**

Dungeon Explorer

score

System(s)	PSP	**Multi**	1-3 player local
Developer	Hudson Soft	**Available**	February 2008
Publisher	Hudson Entertainment	**ESRB Rating**	T

Though some may be turned off by just how much of a dungeon crawler the PSP version of Dungeon Explorer ended up being, those willing to hike up their boots and wade into the game's dark depths will be well rewarded. There's a wide variety of quests to undertake and monsters to slay, and dispatching foes via sword, spell, or special ability is easy and enjoyable thanks to spot-on control. Once you make it to the game's dungeon hub, the Rift, two friends can even join in on the fun... though, sadly, via local AdHoc multi-player only. **Eric L. Patterson**

Naruto: Ninja Destiny

System(s)	Nintendo DS	**Multi**	1-2
Developer	Dream Factory	**Available**	February 26
Publisher	Tomy (distributed by D3)	**ESRB Rating**	T

Naruto: Ninja Destiny came out in Japan last year, but put this retooled version next to it and you'll feel like you're playing a different fighter. It's not often a game gets cleaned up this much in a localization process: the frame-rates been doubled, character art augmented, the backgrounds gussied up, and a few more fighters and extras have been dropped into the mix. Forget the import; this simple but well staged 3D brawler looks exceptional for a DS game, impressively animated and very richly colored and resourced to get the characters smooth and controlled without sacrificing a pleasing level of visual detail. Really well done.

Don't expect too much complication here: a stock move set joins a special jutsu maneuver to build the attacks, which doesn't take too much mastery before you'll feel competent with any of the 16 characters. For a special strike, a chakra gauge builds just as you'd expect in any fighter. For a little extra spin on an otherwise fairly straight-arrow game, the touchscreen comes into play for activating a varying degree of powerups, which are randomly placed in your menu and available once whenever you need the assist. **Brady Fiechter**

Teenage Zombies

System(s)	Nintendo DS	**Multi**	NA
Developer	InLight	**Available**	Q2
Publisher	Ignition Ent.	**ESRB Rating**	RP

Big Brain's mighty brain armies of Alien Brain Thingys have invaded the Earth and commenced buzzing around in their hover jars barbequing suburban tes and causing a genuine nuisance. But when three recently deceased teenagers get a whiff of that sweet brain meat they rise from their graves with an appetite for destruction and all they can eat brains!!! Lefty, a lanky baller can reach high ledges; Fins Magee—who bears little resemblance to a human child—can climb walls and grapple; and Half-Pipe, a legless skateboarder, can jettison off ramps and slip into tight spaces. They also run across their own power-ups, to be stored in their touch screen caskets where they await the tap of your stylus to lumber into action. The game is big on creativity—collecting body parts to assemble for health, scads of stylus-driven mini games, clever level design and great comic-book presentation drive the theme home in a hand-polished hearse – but visually, at this juncture (I was only able to sample one environment) things are definitely on the bland side. Aside from a lack of parallax (which was a no-no on 16-bit so many years ago) and an overly mostly warm color palette, the enemies early on are pretty crude. With any luck things pick up after the first hour or so. They've got a cool little Lost Vikings thing going here it'd be shame to waste it. **Dave Halverson**

WipEout Pulse

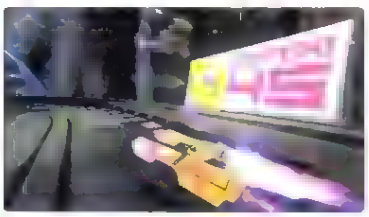
score

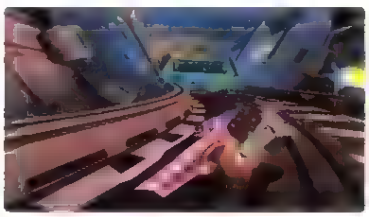
System(s)	PSP	**Multi**	1-8
Developer	SCEE Liverpool	**Available**	February
Publisher	SCEA	**ESRB Rating**	E

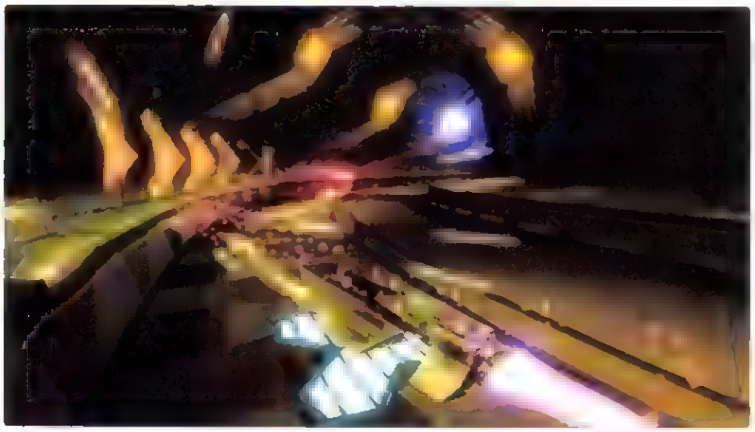
Ch to be new to the WipEout universe, because this hefty installment on the PSP's only nagging slipup is that it stays so close to the formula, it just can't execute like it used to. There's plenty to do and see, the challenge ramping up just right as the game rewards with more engaging speeds and interesting tracks as the grid-based classes open the door for more gameplay. If you're new to this slick brand of futurist c racing, WipEout Pulse has the potential to really impress.

And that's just the thing: this game is a technical powerhouse showcasing excellent design flourishes and a rock-solid racing foundation that, especially near the end, generates the payoff you search for in a good racer. But that explosion of mood and style that propels WipEout at its best is more of a spark this time around, and that may not be good enough for a real fan hoping for the eighth game in the series to be something bold and impressive.

It's tough to discern objectively, but WipEout Pulse doesn't seem as difficult as past games in the series, but perhaps this is better viewed from the perspective that the controls feel as good as ever, especially for the PSP. There's a good bit of track recycling that offers plenty of opportunity for mastery of the racing system, and while some may balk at the repetition, that satisfaction of nailing a perfect lap only comes with a lot of practice in WipEout Pulse. **Brady Fiechter**





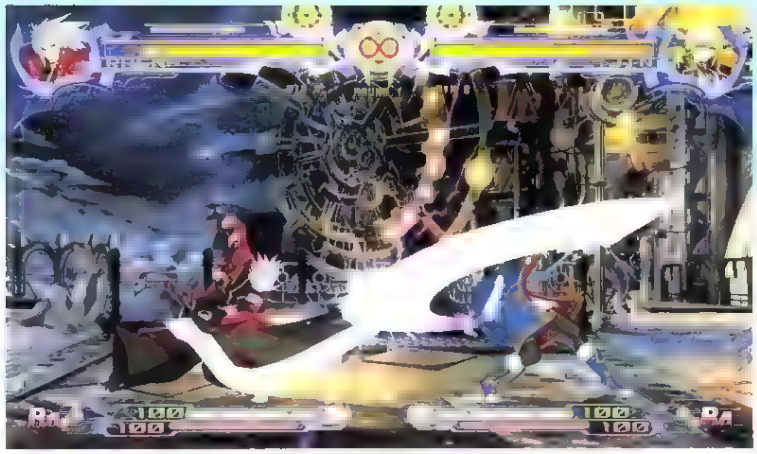


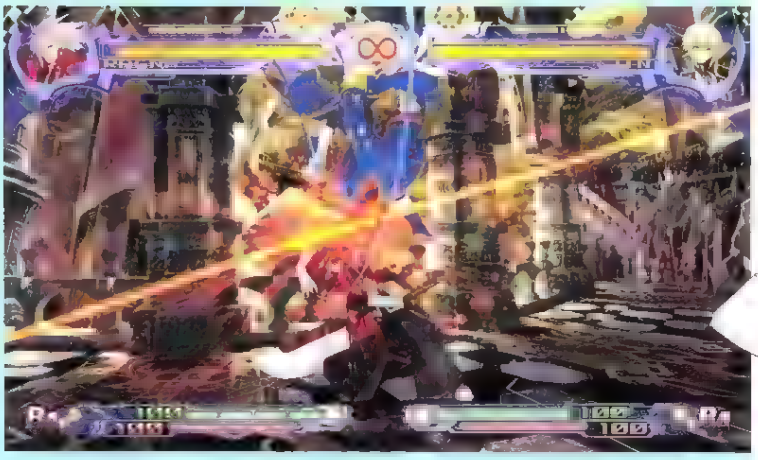
words Nick Des Barres

In 2000, just as 2-D fighting games were beginning their final decline into genre obscurity, Arc System Works released the first 480p hand-drawn fighter in history–Guilty Gear X. Now, eight years later, the genre stands ready to enter a new renaissance. More 2-D fighters are planned for release this year than any other since the late 90s. As this grand new age of animated pugilism dawns, Arc has trumped their historic 480p achievement by announcing the first major high-def hand-drawn game of any kind. Fellow 2-D freaks, it's time to issue a hearty *"Heaven or Hell? Let's Rock!"* in greeting to BlazBlue: Calamity Trigger.

It pains me ever so slightly to have to tell you that BlazBlue (the "z" is silent–just go with the flow and pronounce it "BlayBlue" like your pixel-pushing gods at Arc want you to) is an arcade game. It's probably safe to say you'll be playing it in all its luminescent 720p glory on your PS3 and/or 360 eventually, but its initial release late this year will be for Taito's Type X2 arcade board. Unless you're planning on booking a trip to Japan (or have an extremely with-it arcade nearby that imports Japanese boards), you probably won't have the chance to play the arcade version at all–but hey, at least you can read about it here.

BlazBlue makes its playable debut in mid-February at Japan's Arcade Operators' Union show in Tokyo, but Arc, and game director/character designer Toshimichi Mori, has already told us a great deal about its setting and systems. In terms of story structure it very closely parallels the Guilty Gear series: The time is December, 2199 AD, and the place is a giant mega technopolis called Katsuguchi City. One man, Ragna the Blood Edge (also known as the "Grim Reaper"), rebels against the

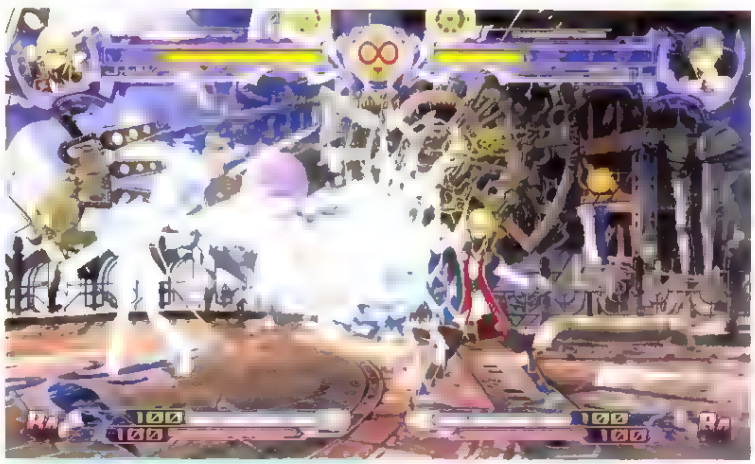




Hand-drawn in HD. Where was this when we were kids?

city's oppressive, tota tar an government the "Organ zat on of Control" Jin K sarag s a young ma,or from the Organization, playing the blonde, noble Ky to red-garbed, antihero Ragna's Sol It probably bears speculation that most of the otner ten nit al y-playable characters will be after the bounty on Ragna's head–the highest of any man in history

The story may be (very) familiar, but gameplay takes a dec dedly d.fferent turn from Guilty Gear In add tion to Light, Med um, and Strong attack buttons, there s a fourth ca ed the "Drive Button" In what is perhaps a fighting game first, Drive has a completely different effect for each character. By us ng the Drive Button, Ragna can produce attacks that actually suck his opponent's life bar to add to his own. Jin can freeze his enem es solid to further



combo off of them, and Noel can use hers n combination with the st ck to invoke extremely rap d-fire gun combos. Through the conce t of the Drive Button, a l ten (- shi characters have a game system unique *only* to them. That would certainly be gnarly enough, but the dua Heat and Barrier gauges sound just as interesting

Broadly speaking, Heat is used for offense, like super moves and the "Rapid Cancel", which can break your character out of attack animation whenever a hit lands, so that you may continue to combo your foe while they're still in hit stun. Barrier is just that–it can be used to perform t ck- ess b ocks, air block, and in its most ultimate form, "Barrier Burst", break out of receiving damage in Killer Instinct *"C C-C-Combo Breaker!!!"* fashion. Th s, however, comes at a great cost: You'll be unable to use your Barrier gauge for the rest of the round, though any stock remaining is transferred to your Heat gauge

It sounds like a fantastic game design, and director Mori has stated that he wants to concentrate on alleviat ng one of Guilty Gear's biggest problems the massive emphasis placed on knocking your opponent down to attack him as he gets up. In a bold design choice, you can apparently continue to combo knocked-down enemies *forever*, unless they perform one of four spec f c invincible wake up moves designed to get them back on their feet We have no idea how that wil work in actual gameplay, but we' l see soon enough. I was beginning to think we might *never* see a hand-drawn, 2-D game in HD, and now that one is on the horizon absolutely can't wa t to get my oldskool arcade gamer mitts on that fancy Drive Button. We' bring you B azBlue (and SF IV) impressions straight from the AOU show f oor next month

Sprite comparison

This hand visual aid displaying a 1:1 comparison between BlazBlue's Ragna, and Sol from the Guilty Gear X series, illustrates exactly how far Arc System Works' pixel virtuosos are willing to go.

System(s)	Arcade Taito Type X2
Developer	Arc System Work
Publisher	Ar
Available	

Tales of Innocence

"The innocent and the beautiful have no enemy but the storage limitations of solid state RAM" ~Yeats (paraphrased)

words Nick Des Barres

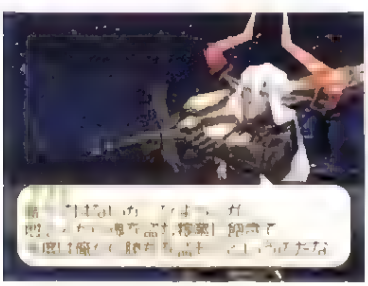
Tales of Innocence may be the tenth Tales game for a portable system, but it's arguably the first *real* one. The others have been remakes, random-dungeon spin-offs, and the Nintendo DS's Tales of the Tempest which turned out to be a 10-hour-long pile of crap with few redeeming features. Stung by the latter title's catastrophic failure, Namco-Bandai gave developer Alfa System (who made Tales of the World: Radiant Mythology) the resources to create a 40 hour RPG with top voice talent, a fully animated opening movie, and perhaps the most impressive game engine ever to grace the Nintendo DS. Tales of Innocence is not a perfect game, but it is certainly an impressive one.

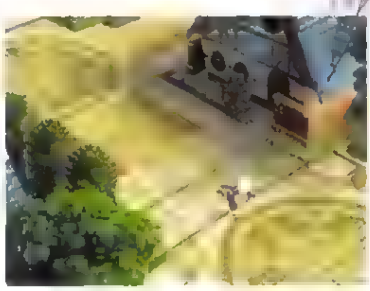
Tales of Innocence has an imaginative and extremely involved story that is, if anything, overly ambitious. The game's main characters are united by their mysterious powers and recurring dreams about past lives as divine beings. The story unfolds along parallel tracks, chronicling the "reincarnates" as they travel the world to find each other and escape those who would exploit them, while unlocking the dense mythology of their past lives in lengthy flashbacks. Unfortunately, the DS cartridge isn't anywhere near large enough to hold the voice for all of the event scenes and skits that are necessary to untangle this elaborate tale, so Tales of Innocence has an unusually high ratio of reading to playing; you can barely move from one side of the screen to another without triggering a new skit. Skits are optional, of course, but you don't dare pass them up, since they're tied to this game's version of the Affection system, where your characters bond with each other to unlock even more events. The sheer amount of story in Tales of Innocence is a tad excessive, but the characters are so charming and interesting that their lengthy debates about even the tiniest of plot points tend to be enjoyable.

The distinctiveness of the characters carries over beautifully to combat, where Alfa System has successfully broken the fighter/spellcaster mold of past Tales games by basing ranged characters around guns instead of spells. All six

"Tales of Innocence has an imaginative and extremely involved story that is, if anything, overly ambitious."

You'll be doing a fair amount of reading in Tales of Innocence. It's just not that easy to squeeze a bunch of voice into DS cart.





of the heroes are fun to p ay, and the ab lity to switch between your three party characters with a tap of the L button allows you to set up mu ti character combos with ease Virtual y every aspect of the battle system .s pitch-perfect—the act on is fast and smooth, the b.ocking and dodging options are easy to use and strateg cally interesting, and the focus on fewer characters g ves you more control over how the battle unfo ds The battles in Ta es of Innocence play ike a simp e but well-tuned f ghting game (albeit one marred by the crappy DS contro pad), making this one area in which A.faSystem seems to have the edge over their bosses at Tales Stud o

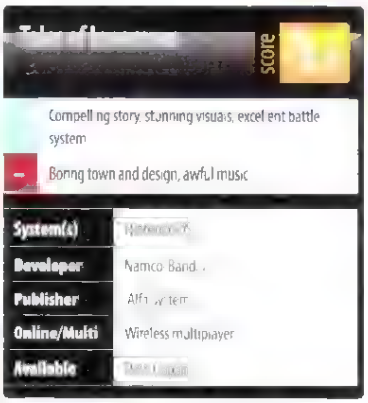
Unfortunately, A faSystem isn't even close to Tales Studio when t comes to other aspects of game design While Tales of Innocence's world s huge and beautiful, del vering smooth-scroll ng, deta led environments that are ten t mes the size of the ones n, say, F na Fantasy III, there s absolutely noth ng to do in them Dungeons are generally free of any sort of g mmicks— there aren't any Sorcerer's Ring puzzles or even any keys or switches. The towns are as barren as they are beautiful, offering no hidden treasures, no ob,ects to exam ne, and no Wonder Chef to f nd All you can do is look for shops and chat with c ueless townsfolk Also, bes des ts exceptiona intro and ending themes, Tales of Innocence has a horrible soundtrack with grating background music that seems to be on a 10-seconds oop

Ta es of Innocence does have several new mechanics that give it ts own feel, a though they aren't all successfu The ab l ty to attack foes while on the battlefie d map (which results in them start ng the battle with less nit points) is a lot of fun, as is having to free run on the battlefie d to pick up the gold and treasure dropped by bested foes. Less fun are the mindlessly repetitive g.uild quests that are necessary for grinding and getting rare tems, and the new AI system, which bas cally rips off the Gambits system from F nal Fantasy XII. Whi e in theory it's nice to have a deep eve of control over your NPC party members, in practice it's just a time-consuming hass.e that doesn't actua y result in smarter AI than in previous Tales games

> "Tales of Innocence is a great way to burn through a long flight, but it isn't anywhere near the level of the console Tales installments."

With a strong storyline and a wonderfu battle system Ta es of Innocence is a great way to burn through a long fl ght but t isn't anywhere near the leve of the console Ta es instal ments. Of course, I wouldn't normally expect a DS game to match the quality of the mega-budget console nsta lments The thing is, Namco-Banda has dec ared Ta es of Innocence to be a "mothership" title, making it the first non-sp n-off Tales insta lment since Tales of the Abyss. They also claimed that the DS is so well-su ted for Tales games that it could be the series' primary home going forward Both of those announcements are abso utely ud crous—Tales of Innocence is a mere shadow of a game compared to the sprawl ng epics Tales of Symphonia and Tales of the Abyss, and v sually and aurally, the move from CD to cartr dge has resulted in a huge step back for the series For a franchise that was built on vo ce acting and animated cut scenes, the DS is surely the worst possible platform

But I'm not going to hold that against the developers. Instead, I choose to v ew Tales of Innocence as a we l-made spin-off and one of the best orig na RPG's on the Nintendo DS It's long, it has a very compelling story, and its battle system is a ot of fun It is also arguably the single most technica y impressive game ever made on the Nintendo DS, putting even Nintendo and Square-Enix's best efforts to shame. I understand that portab e RPG's don't do so wel n the states, but Ta es of Innocence offers a rare opportunity for the ser es It would be a shame if Namco Banda didn't seize the chance to win over domestic graphic-whores by local zing this for the North American market



Aion

An exhaustive high fantasy endeavor

[redacted] closed beta test, almost the entire company fell ill to exhaustion and flu. Many [redacted] falling away and responding to the feedback of three thousand lucky participants had the team pushing too hard and they paid the price. This is NCsoft's internal Studio 3, and [redacted] a holiday. Beside their secret PS3 development group and ArenaNet's elite Guild Wars 2 team [redacted] in the states, there's no bigger or better-funded studio within NC [redacted] positioned as the next major premium

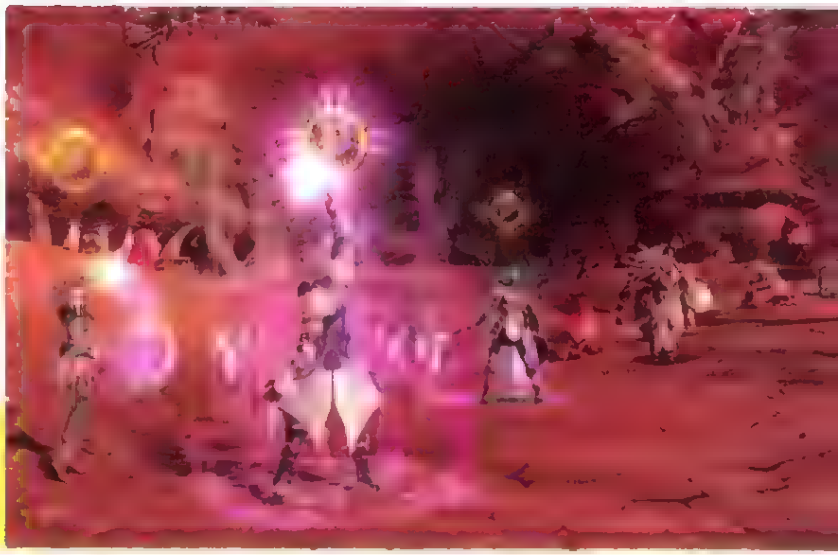
MMO [redacted] one of the industry's biggest operat[redacted] with [redacted] and with competition like Warhammer and Age of Conan [redacted] around the corner, it's not going to get [redacted] easy. Will it [redacted] to make

Aion's subtitle, 'The Tower of [redacted]' refers to the mass of verdant structures [redacted] the two fractured [redacted] of Atreia together like weights on opposite ends of a dumbbell. The land Aion [redacted] guild for this great tower, in centuries past when the world was still whole. Aion was closer to his subjects, the blessed Asmodians [redacted] Elyos, [redacted] the two [redacted]

the world in a cataclysmic explosion. The Asmodians and Elyos were stripped of their god-like abilities and banished to opposite sides of shattered Atreia. Now only the Balaur, a race of dragonmen, reside near the tower—in a huge limbo known as the Abyss (a.k.a. PvP Central).

The Asmodians and Elyos are the races you get to play, while the AI controlled Balaur act as a foil to any faction that is becoming too powerful. Elyos is the bright, nature-loving race. They live in the lower globe, which receives 80% of the sunlight, so their lands are filled with verdant forests and sparkling groves. The brooding goth-like Asmodians have nonetheless flourished in their darker lands. Both races blame each other for their fall from grace. You enter the world as one who bears the blessings of Aion, a heroic mutant of sorts among your people. The first part of the newbie game in Aion will involve quests that explain your origins and restore various godly perks, like your wings. Feathery for the Elyos and bat-like leathery for Asmodians, the wings are handy for crossing Atreia's huge regions and accessing select aerial content.

Aion's game space is 90% persistent and 10% instanced, so expect a huge array of open world distractions and obsessions. The main campaign quest line is supported by loads of well-directed real-time cut-scenes, lending Aion the kind of solid narrative you'd normally see in a single-player RPG. Content is thick, comfortably familiar and well-considered. Crafters will equip their friends and light up the auction house with opportunities in cooking, alchemy, weapon crafting, dyes, potions, textiles and cloth. You can do some interesting things, like merging the appearance of a favorite item with the stats of another. So if that new sword



kicks ass but clashes with your armor, you can always keep the old sword's look. If you rarely approach the crafting tables in MMOs, be sure to help your friends by gathering materials for them in the wild. From Elysea's ghost ship graveyard to Mycospora's giant mushroom forest and the bleak desert tableau of Death Valley, Aion's many lands are ripe for exploration.

Meanwhile, the Abyss can be considered the central hub of hardcore activity in Aion, where players will take on the most legendary PvE raid bosses with the best loot tables, and partake in massive PvP action between the player factions and the Balaur, as if the great war never ended. While Studio 5 has only revealed one Abyss zone thus far, reportedly a smaller one, it contained nine siege fortresses and a sprawling boss dungeon. All successful efforts in this warzone will yield Abyss Points, acting as stats for the leaderboards and a currency of sorts for alternate routes of progression. It's rumored that one of Aion's ultimate end game achievements, graduating to a Hero class, may involve a portion of Abyss rewards. Heroes will be vicious avatars, capable of demolishing several enemy players at once (in reasonably-spaced bursts). When a Hero player enters the zone, all opposing players will be alerted with a message. That's how bad ass you are.

Let's not get ahead of ourselves though. The early archetypes in Aion will be very familiar to any RPG player. I actually welcome the simplicity of the four basics: Warrior, Scout, Mage and Priest. The Warrior evolves into a whirling dervish Gladiator or damage absorbing Templar, the Scout splices into a backstabbing Assassin or the bow pro Ranger, the Mage can be a blaster as Sorcerer or a pet expert as Spiritmaster, and the Priest will graduate to portable medkit as Cleric, or a battle priest with stat buffs and skull-cracking staff attacks as the Chanter. What class did you just pick? I've been a good scout most of my RPG career, but it's healer time in Aion; a *very* desirable party member for the many six player dungeon crawls and twenty-four player boss raids.

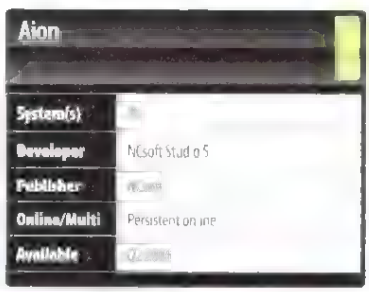
Back in 2004 as I recovered from a hangover of MMO marathons, I can recall playing Far Cry and thinking how glorious the CryEngine would be for building persistent worlds. Surprisingly, Aion is the only MMO to have licensed Crytek's first power suite. So what can this engine produce in 2008?

Consider Aion's art style: unmistakably Asian high fantasy, from palette choices to character designs, and by and large this dream-like world design is very appealing. At first glance the angles and polygonal complexity may recall the typical Renderware or Unreal 2.5 MMO mod. A closer look reveals a great deal more rendering muscle in Aion as the CryEngine goes to work. lush animating vegetation, mist from the ocean's lapping waves, tons of ambient animal life, full weather effects, heat shimmer, HDR, atmospheric smoke, lovely water and lava shaders, all drawn out to a far-off, Far Cry-like clip distance and contained by striking skybox paintings. The accumulated effect is exotic, impressive and next-gen in its own way, even if it isn't flanked by glossy normal-mapped excess. And you can look forward to smooth performance with high settings on as low a video spec as GeForce 7600 GT.

I must mention Ryo Kunihiko's excellent work on the Aion soundtrack. Ranging from grand symphonic pieces recorded with the London Symphony Orchestra, to epic choirs, baroque waltzes, tip-toeing toy pianos and haunting violin solos, Aion is guided by sophisticated and memorable melodies. Head to www.secret-oath.com/aion/player.htm to stream samples of the entire soundtrack (provided printing this ink doesn't make the site explode). You'll likely agree that it goes beyond the usual MMO fare. NCsoft will undoubtedly produce a collector's edition of Aion that includes an OST disc.

All the elements are in place for a very complete MMO experience... except hype, a sexy franchise name, and major marketing. I'm sure Aion will find a big audience in Korea, China and Japan, but it's going to be a tough sell in North America

simply due to WoW's stranglehold and Warhammer and Conan (probably) beating it to market. Maybe Aion's quality and heart—the blood, sweat and tears that had Studio 5 dropping like flies—will shine through the mist of uncertainty. What NCsoft needs is a truly fantastic localization (translation and voices must be top notch) and a silky-smooth summer beta to get players hooked.

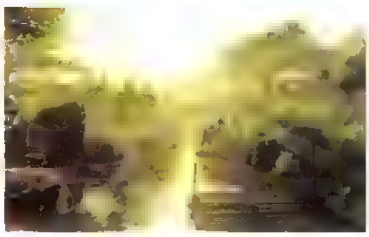


Far Cry 2

System(s)	PC, Xbox 360, PS3	**Multi**	TBA
Developer	Ubisoft Montreal	**Available**	March
Publisher	Ubisoft	**ESRB Rating**	M

The reign of Crysis as graphical champion could be coming to an end in March, if Ubisoft Montreal's Far Cry sequel has anything to say about it. The Dunia engine fueling this modern-era FPS is the most powerful technology the developer has ever produced, lending remarkable next-gen lustre to Far Cry 2's fifty square kilometres of African savannah and jungle. Foliage is incredibly thick and always in motion, the day-to-night cycle and lighting fidelity are stunning, and as per the rule of the day, loads of realistically modeled and normal mapped objects can be destroyed. Here, this stuff also gradually rebuilds and re-spawns. Even a torched patch of grass will eventually rise again.

This pulsating organic world falls into step with Far Cry 2's gameplay. Abandoning the more linear forays of previous franchise efforts, Far Cry 2 joins a number of forthcoming shooters that surround the main missions with huge open-ended environments, RPG informed side-questing and progressive NPC faction metrics. Days go by in Far Cry 2, ambient African life proceeds, and as one of ten agents (think of them as avatar types, not so much fully-explored protagonists) you stalk a massive map, playing sides in a vicious ongoing battle between warlords on a quest to capture the king of arms dealers. Like Assassin's Creed, Far Cry 2 is another huge (150+ staff) production. These tend to work out well for the studio. **Mike Griffin**



It's a violent safari and you're invited.

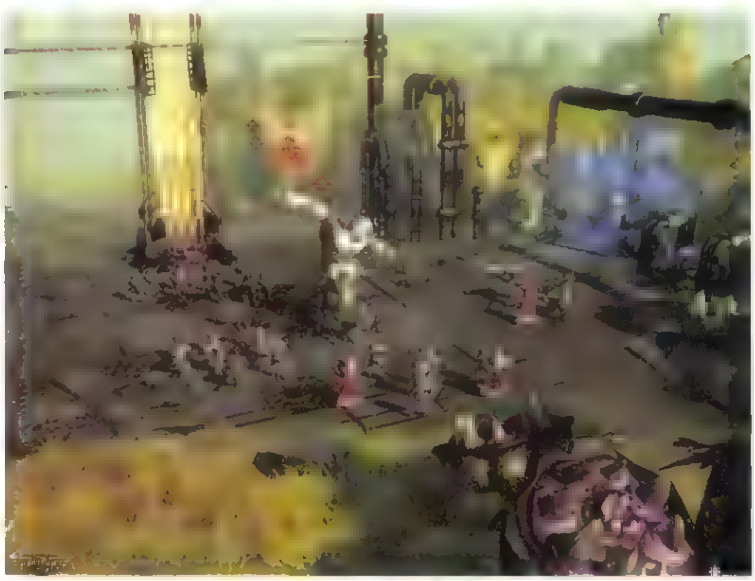
WorldShift

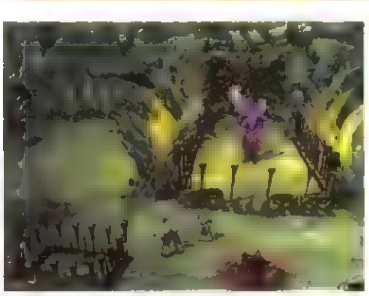
System(s)	PC	**Multi**	Co-op and PvP
Developer	Black Sea Studios	**Available**	Q2 2008
Publisher	TBA	**ESRB Rating**	TBA

People love to collect loot. If you have thousands of cool items to find and equip in your game, against all odds, the mystical power of loot collection can prevail. While it's common to load-up RPGs with huge loot tables, Black Sea Studios recognized an opportunity in the RTS genre. It's a big part of WorldShift, their upcoming strategy title. Taking place on a ravaged Earth hundreds of years in the future, WorldShift's missions will be spiked with a massive bounty of useable and equipable items for both mutant and human faction units—and there's even more loot online.

An alien plague has destroyed or mutated all life on the planet in WorldShift's distant future. For some, it's not a bad deal. The Xenolite stones left behind in the plague's wake caused rapid development of psi powers in many of the warring humans and mutants. The precious resource also has incredible applications in weaponry and shielding. WorldShift won't be a resource gathering treadmill however. You'll have deep tech-trees and automation to unlock, and in the aforementioned piles of loot you'll find artifacts that actually create new tech-trees, adding further depth to your units' repertoire of abilities.

Black Sea has also created a unique 3-player co-op mode for WorldShift that focuses on team tactics in tough dungeons. To further incentivize the multiplayer, there's an entirely new loot table in the dungeon co-op mode with yet more useful items and artifacts to collect. Don't worry, there's also PvP, and Black Sea is very proud of its map randomization system, claiming it's the best the genre has ever known. **Mike Griffin**





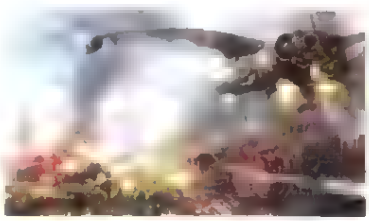
The Day

System(s)	PC	**Multi**	Persistent online
Developer	Reloaded Studios	**Available**	2010
Publisher	TBA	**ESRB Rating**	TBA

As you can tell from the early assets and the 2010 release date The Day is still years away from surfacing however this project is far too ambitious to ignore Reloaded Studios is creating an online action adventure monster and they've decided that only the CryEngine 2 (last seen in Crysis) can power this vision of mankind's meddling with the space time continuum

In The Day's future, scientists have stumbled upon two Earth-shattering technologies worm holes and genomic transfer Not only can we tear into the fabric of space, we can hop through it Initially it's highly regulated, but soon political corruption leads to a series of manipulations in the past, dramatically altering both the old and new DNA is manipulated and greedy executives sap resources in the past, sending further shockwaves into the future The truth escapes and large anti government coalitions form Soon the resistance uncovers another secret, the existence of a parallel world, the by-product of further worm hole research The fools have also taken their exploitation and wars to this alternate Earth

You play a time-traveling agent in this dual world showdown Gameplay in The Day will have players entering the fray of famous historical eras and events, but with a highly re-interpreted twist thanks to mankind's cock-ups in time travel and the parallel world's strange history And all of this will take place online, with visible repercussions to shared world space as massively multiplayer hordes stampede across time, assault rifles in tow **Mike Griffin**



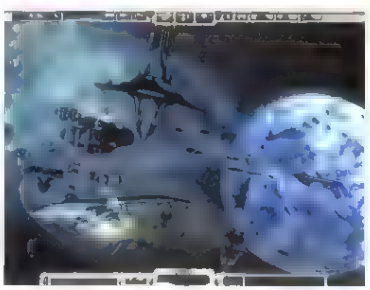
Sins of a Solar Empire

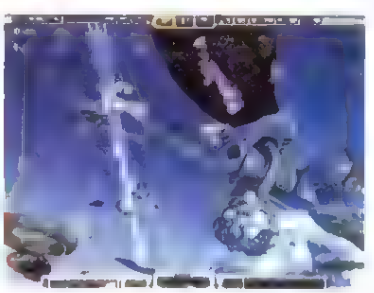
System(s)	PC	**Multi**	up to 10-players
Developer	Ironclad Games	**Available**	February
Publisher	Stardock	**ESRB Rating**	T

The 4X (explore, expand exploit and exterminate) space strategy genre used to be intimidating territory for new players, laden with tedious unit management, cluttered UIs and dull presentation. We've had bright stars through the years, from Homeworld to Galactic Civilizations 2, even online hybrids like EVE, but many other offerings regressed to their prohibitive roots If you've been waiting for a decidedly contemporary 4X space game with many of the amenities of the top RTS games, Ironclad's Sins of a Solar Empire should enter your orbit

Sins adopts the proven model of three playable factions, offering the human Trader coalition, the Advent (ex led humans with a vastly different culture), and the ancient phase-shifting alien race, the Vasari One of the most welcome and impressive features in Sins is its great Empire tree Effectively conveying and simplifying the huge breadth of Sins combat and trade, this mega control pane offers an all-encompassing meta view of units and current actions. It's possible to set commands and queues for every task and seamlessly zoom the camera from galactic to fleet views, so you can spend quality time with big encounters, taking-in the game's great looking battles. Bolstered by a rigorously-tested multiplayer mode with a cool save and resume feature (when morning comes too soon for you and your opponent), Sins of the Solar Empire further reinforces Stardock's supremacy in this sub-genre **Mike Griffin**

Galactic ownership on an epic scale.

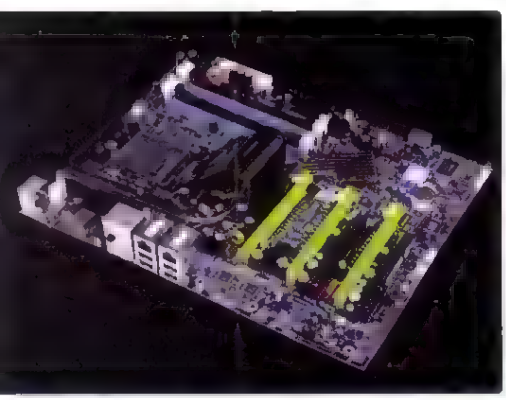




ask alienware

no. 020 // march 2008

Do you think we've settled on Nvidia's "3 way" technology as the new standard in multi-GPU? For a while it seemed like quad SLI was coming in, but this was a technology that required tons of power and cooling. It was out of my reach. Is 3-way a more feasible solution, and what sort of raw rendering increase does it provide vs. a single card?
Conor, AB



3-way SLI is NVIDIA's new standard in multi-GPU technology and it is replacing quad SLI. Rather than two cards each with 2 onboard GPUs, 3-way SLI utilizes three cards, each with a single processing unit. This makes 3-way SLI more feasible than quad SLI since you don't need specialized cards. The NVIDIA GeForce 8800 GTX and 8800 Ultra, which support 3-way SLI, also work in single and dual GPU configurations. As long as your motherboard supports 3-way SLI, you're good to go. As for performance, the technology offers an incredible increase in rendering speeds and GPU frame rates per second. And while it does consume more power than dual GPU configurations, 3-way SLI does not require ultra-high-end cooling systems. 3-way SLI does not increase thermals to the point where system damage would occur.

I just picked up a nice HD camcorder over the holidays and a few weeks later I've outgrown the included camera software. Not to mention, my feeble laptop takes ages to encode a final movie clip. I think the next step for me is a new PC that we can edit our videos on, along with more advanced movie editing software. Can you recommend a sweet all-in-one software package and a few parts that will ensure fast and stable high definition movie editing?
Paul, CA

Windows Vista offers a very good software for home movies called Windows Movie Maker which provides an all-in-one package for basic video editing. Best of all, you don't have to pay for it. It comes standard with both Windows Vista Home Premium and Windows Vista Ultimate. If you are just working with home movies, you probably don't need any advanced editing software, which can cost $400 - $500 or more anyway. You should be fine with Windows Movie Maker. As for your feeble laptop, we do recommend a system with at least a dual core processor and a minimum of 2GB of RAM.

Is it possible to make free long distance phone calls using a PC, and is it legal and reliable to do so? Can I use a regular phone?
Trevor, WA.

One of the best programs for PC-based phone calls is Skype, and while it isn't exactly free it's pretty darn close. Skype to Skype calls are free and the company's Web site advertises "pay as you go" calls for as low as 2.1 cents per minute to non-Skype customers. For a nominal, and we mean ridiculously low monthly fee, Skype Pro customers can call free within the US and Canada with discounted international rates. Again, it's not free, but it certainly beats most cell phone plans. Unfortunately, today you cannot use a regular phone. You need a specially designed phone for Skype.

At what length does an HDMI cable's signal begin to degrade? I'd like to run a cable from my video card's second DVI output to my HDTV across the room. At around 16 feet, will I need to purchase an incredibly expensive cable to ensure no signal degradation? Would it be more effective to use my video card's component adapter and run a length of component to the TV instead?
Dave, TX

Due to the digital capabilities of an HDMI cable, at sixteen feet you should be fine. With your setup of connecting to your video card's second DVI, you will not have any problems and you will get a clear signal free of degradation. The biggest advantage of top name cables is the quality of the connectors. They will provide a clearer picture to your television. Purchasing expensive cables, such as gold-plated Monster Cables, will up your signal quality, but again, they are expensive. Also keep in mind that when running DVI to HDMI or running component to your TV from your video card you will lose audio.

If I upgrade to the 64-bit version of Windows Vista and insert around 8 GB of RAM into my PC, in what applications am I likely to notice a big difference? I'm optimistic about games running smoother, but a friend assures me that most new games aren't even programmed to recognize or use more than a couple gigs of RAM at most. Could you help clear this up?
Darren, CO

While we expect the near future will have more games optimized for the 64-bit version of Windows Vista, most current games have not been. In fact, some games do not support the 64-bit version at all and will only run on 32 bit versions of Windows. So, you will not see any real benefits upgrading to the 64 bit Windows Vista, or to 8GB of RAM, unless you are running CAD or engineering applications.

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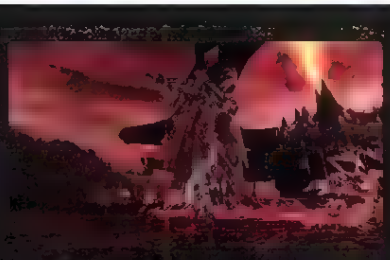

Gravity gets gory with Requiem

When you think of Gravity Interactive, bright and happy MMOs like Ragnarok come to mind. It's time for them to diversify into the realm of bloody horror. As Gravity's CEO attests, "Requiem isn't a game for kids; this is for mature players that are looking for hardcore content that conjures up their deepest nightmares and fears." In the gothic fantasy world of Ethegia, you'll become a mutant of genetic engineering and arcane blessings born into a war of science and magic. With hulking avatars, giant swords and geysers of Havok-powered arterial bits, levelling up in Requiem: Bloodymare is non-stop embellished carnage. And this online RPG's day-to-night cycle isn't just cosmetic; the nastiest creatures prowl by moonlight.

The galaxy welcomes a new space MMO

While Blizzard still rules the roost, raking in over $1 bill on last year, Codemasters Online Gaming has quickly forged a name for itself in the MMO space, hosting premium hits like LotR Online and popular free-to-play Korean titles like Rising Force and ArchLord. The next big signing for Codemasters' online division is Jumpgate, a space shooter/MMO hybrid from NetDevil, creators of the ill-fated (though not ill-conceived) Auto Assault. Jumpgate's DNA comes from the space sim shooters of old: classics like Wing Commander and X-Wing, so it emphasizes twitch-based blasting as opposed to lock-on stat rolls in the usual MMO template. Beneath Jumpgate's blazing lasers, a deep RPG game exists: missions, exploration, ship building and mining (precious ores hidden in dangerous asteroid fields) will take you across the universe

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LOG

anime review

In the 17 years I've been covering anime this was by far the most turbulent. The anime industry has certainly weathered its share of storms but never has the fecal matter hit the fan as it did in 2007. The consolidation of retail outlets in the US, as massive corporations moved in to begin dictating what we consume, has not been easy on a cottage industry that survived through a network of diverse retailers, from music stores to mall outlets like Suncoast to a slew of Mom and Pops specializing in imported goods. Anime has always been a niche industry, but niche industries don't get shelf space at Best Buy, Target, and Wal-Mart. And without them, obscurity awaits. And so anime companies had to step up, and step up they did with some of the greatest series and OVAs we've ever seen. But all that licensing, localization and infrastructure means more overhead and when your primary customer is downloading fan subs or reading manga on the floor at Barnes & Noble, well, they're certainly not going to pay all those new bills. With the exception of a few savvy companies who saw the writing on the wall, the bulk of the anime industry just crashed and burned. Geneon is gone, which alone accounts for 30-40% of the top series each year and ADV Films—the GM of the anime world—is undergoing a last-ditch reorganization. Imagining an anime industry without ADV is difficult to say the least. Bandai has scaled way back; VIZ, FUNimation and Manga Entertainment (quality over quantity publishers) are holding their own, Central Park media is gone, and Media Blasters once-mighty quiver has slowed to a trickle. AN, Right Stuf and a handful of tiny publishers are too small to warrant any retail muscle, and the few titles the major studios pick up they usually just toss out with little to no marketing or press. They don't even bother to send us screeners. Pretty bleak eh? Well, maybe not. In fact, it's about time this all went down. One of two things will come of this. The industry in Japan—whose bread and butter is the US market—needs to continue the new trend of East-meets-West ventures and creating anime that appeals to a mass US audience such as *Afro Samurai*, *Witchblade*, *Samurai Champloo*, *Cowboy BeBop*, *Highlander*, *Ghost in the Shell*, *Black Lagoon*, *Death Note*, etc., and then license it to a company or companies that can bring it to market as animated series and features, not "anime" to a larger demographic. TV and print advertising in non-otaku venues is also paramount. This will allow the traditional anime companies of the world to keep producing the kind of unusual shows (like *FLCL*, *NHK*, *Gacha Gacha*, *Sergeant Frog*, *My Hime*, etc.) that we all know and love, as there will be a nice big healthy industry to plop them into, and everyone's happy. There's no such thing as a cottage industry in the US any longer. Sadly, we've been driven to the brink by greedy unscrupulous corporate megalomaniacs with tiny penises who won't be happy until we all have credit card numbers and membership data tattooed on our foreheads. I have an idea of what companies might take anime to a level where it can thrive in the US, but that's a topic for another feature (coming soon!). For now let's concentrate on what went right during the last year of the anime industry as we know it.

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FMP! The Second Raid
FUNimation
Witchblade
FUNimation
Freedom Project
Bandai Visual
La Chevalier d'Eon
ADV Films
2006

Paprika
Sony Pictures Home Entertainment

Noein
Manga Entertainment

Diebuster
Bandai Visual

Ghost in the Shell: Solid State Society
Bandai Entertainment/Manga Entertainment

The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya
Bandai Entertainment

anime
review
Black Lagoon
Geneon
04
Afro Samurai
FUNimation
03
Beck
FUNimation
02

DEATH NOTE
Death Note 01
VIZ Media

top ten anime review

dave halverson
editor in chief

2007 was something of a reawakening for the anime industry. Rising from obscurity comes at a price and the industry finally had to pay up, marking the end of Geneon (Pioneer), a staple in the anime world since it all began, along with downsizing at Bandai and ADV Films. Meanwhile companies like FUNimation and Manga Entertainment lead the way by producing the kind of mass-market content that will propel the industry forward in the future. Titles like *Afro Samurai*, *Karas*, *Highlander*, and *Witchblade*. Elsewhere the stalwart VIZ Media remained the rock of the industry, producing hit manga, anime, and live-action appealing to a wide variety of consumers from otaku to mainstream. I believe that 2007 wasn't the beginning of the end but a new beginning; the birth of what will become the modern anime industry. Digital and On-Demand delivery, savvy marketing, and crossover branding are key to bringing anime to the masses. And the world will be a better place for it.

01. **Afro Samurai**
02. **DieBuster**
03. **Death Note**
04. **Witchblade**
05. **Freedom Project**
06. **Beck**
07. **Ergo Proxy**
08. **Black Lagoon**
09. **Tekkonkinkreet**
10. **Highlander**

"I believe that 2007 wasn't the beginning of the end but a new beginning..."

renter campbell
senior editor

2007 was a great year for anime, but mostly because of the staggering quality of Death Note and The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya. Death Note is one of the best anime series of the last decade. It's so incredible, in fact, that I believe it may be my favorite anime of all time after the dust settles. I like to give these things some breathing room, and I'll re-evaluate it in another five years. Haruhi is charming meta-anime; a sci-fi love story with fun philosophy. And then there's Gunbuster 2 --classic afternoon stuff with a ferocious budget (like Gainax's most recent series, Tengen Toppa Gurren Lagann). Noein? Well, if you're introducing someone to anime, use this show. It's well-written, original, and comes to a satisfying conclusion—and as anime fans know, the ending is typically the most difficult thing for a series to get right. I can't stress Death Note enough, though. With the ending coming in 2008, it may very well be my favorite show two years running.

01. **Death Note**
02. **The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya**
03. **Noein**
04. **Gunbuster 2**
05. **Ghost in the Shell SAC (The Laughing Man)**
06. **Tekkonkinkreet**
07. **Mushi-shi**
08. **Ghost in the Shell: Solid State Society**
09. **Paprika**
10. **Bleach**

categories

best fight
Kuma Battle Afro Samurai

Revy vs. The Nazis Black Lagoon
Nono (#7) vs. The Exelio Fluctuating Gravity Well Gunbuster 2

best villain
Jinnosuke / "Kuma" Afro Samurai

The Empty 7 Afro Samurai

best character male
Afro Afro Samurai

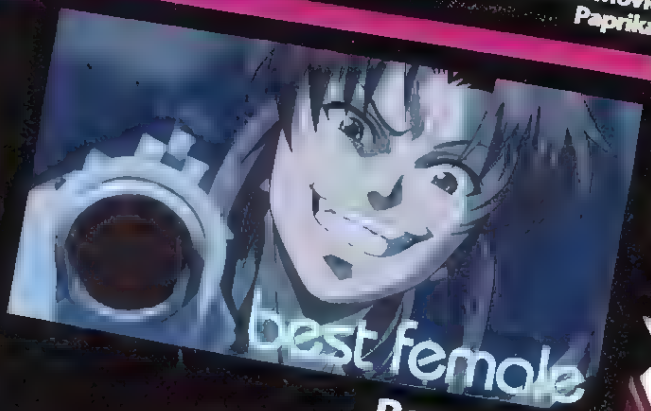
Light

best OVA
Afro Samurai FUNimation

Gunbuster
Freedom Project

best movie
Ghost in the Shell: Solid State Society Bandai Entertainment/Manga Entertainment

Gunbuster vs. Diebuster Aim For The Top! The Gattai Movie
Paprika



best female
Revy Black Lagoon

Nono Gunbuster 2

best new series
Death Note VIZ Media

Beck
Black Lagoon

to be continued on pg 90

anime review top ten

bill gray
associate anime editor

Was 2007 the high-water mark for anime? With Geneon's death, ridiculous licensing fees, poor marketing, and a host of pir—*cough* fansubbers, who exactly is anime's audience? Tapped-out otaku? To go mainstream, word must be spread, smart properties must be acquired, and anime must be articulated to the masses. Thus, it's doubly ironic that I picked *Beck*, a sort of "anti-mass market anime," to be my top title of 2007. Titles like *Le Chevalier D'Aeon*, *When They Cry*, and the surprisingly existential *Black Lagoon* managed to entertain and make me feel. Naturally, anime 2007 wasn't devoid of bangs, babes and bazoombas, but if titles like *Witchblade* and *Afro Samurai* represent what needs to happen to keep anime strong in America, then bring it on—the ends justify the means when the ends can be as affecting as last year's crop. The high-water mark? Let's hope the tide keeps rising.

01. Beck
02. Le Chevalier d'Eon
03. Black Lagoon
04. When They Cry
05. Death Note
06. Glass Fleet
07. Afro Samurai
08. Utawarerumono
09. Hell Girl
10. Mushi-shi

"To go mainstream, word must be spread, smart properties must be acquired..."

daniel campisi
contributing editor

Despite residual pain from the sucker punch Geneon delivered with the realization that some of my favorite Geneon series may go unfinished, 2007 was a fantastic year for anime in the US. Usually, I have no problem picking ten favorites from the year gone by, but '07 gave me quite a bit of trouble. In a year that saw the return of iconic characters like Motoko Kusanagi, and the introduction of new characters destined to become icons themselves like Haruhi Suzumiya and Light Yagami—not to mention releases from masters like Satoshi Kon and Yoshiaki Kawajiri—I was at war with myself trying to decide what chosen few would make the esteemed top ten. How I managed to whittle it down without my brain exploding will remain a mystery for the ages. Now if someone would just step up to finish out Black Lagoon, all would be right in the world.

01. Black Lagoon
02. The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya
03. Paprika
04. Ghost in the Shell: Solid State Society
05. Mushi-shi
06. Full Metal Panic: The Second Raid
07. Beck
08. Karin
09. Afro Samurai
10. When They Cry

categories

best fight
Kuma Battle Afro Samurai

Revy vs. The Nazis Black Lagoon
Nono (#7) vs. The Exelio Fluctuating Gravity Well Gunbuster 2

best villain
Jinnosuke / "Kuma" Afro Samurai

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best character male
Afro Afro Samurai

Light

best OVA
Afro Samurai FUNimation

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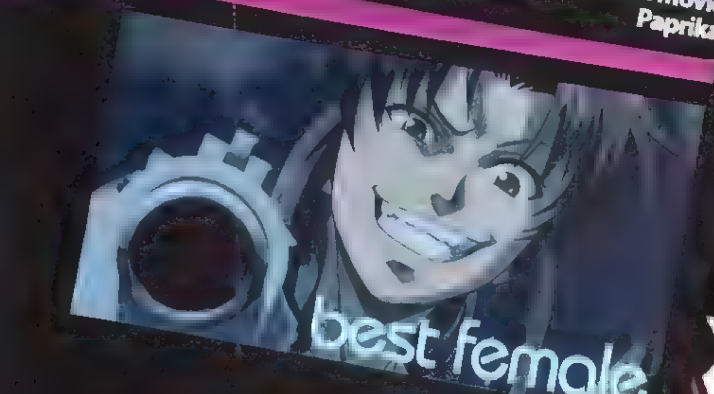
best movie
Ghost in the Shell: Solid State Society Bandai Entertainment/Manga Entertainment

Gunbuster vs. Diebuster Aim For The Top! The Gattai Movie
Paprika



best female
Revy Black Lagoon

Nono Gunbuster 2

best new series
Death Note Viz Media

Beck
Black Lagoon

to be continued on pg 90

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THE NEWEST CREATION FROM *SHOJI KAWAMORI*- THE LEGEND BEHIND *MACROSS PLUS* AND *THE VISION OF ESCAFLOWNE* WITH AN ORIGINAL SOUNDTRACK BY *COWBOY BEBOP'S YOKO KANNO*

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ONE PIECE!

The Desert Princess and the Pirates Adventures in Alabasta

One Piece Movie: The Desert Princess and the Pirates Adventures in Alabasta score

As an added treat, they come. An extremely funny dub that's [illegible]

Animation quality not always up to movie status

Released By	Funimation
Running Time	90 minutes
Episodes	NA
Rating	PG-13
Available	February

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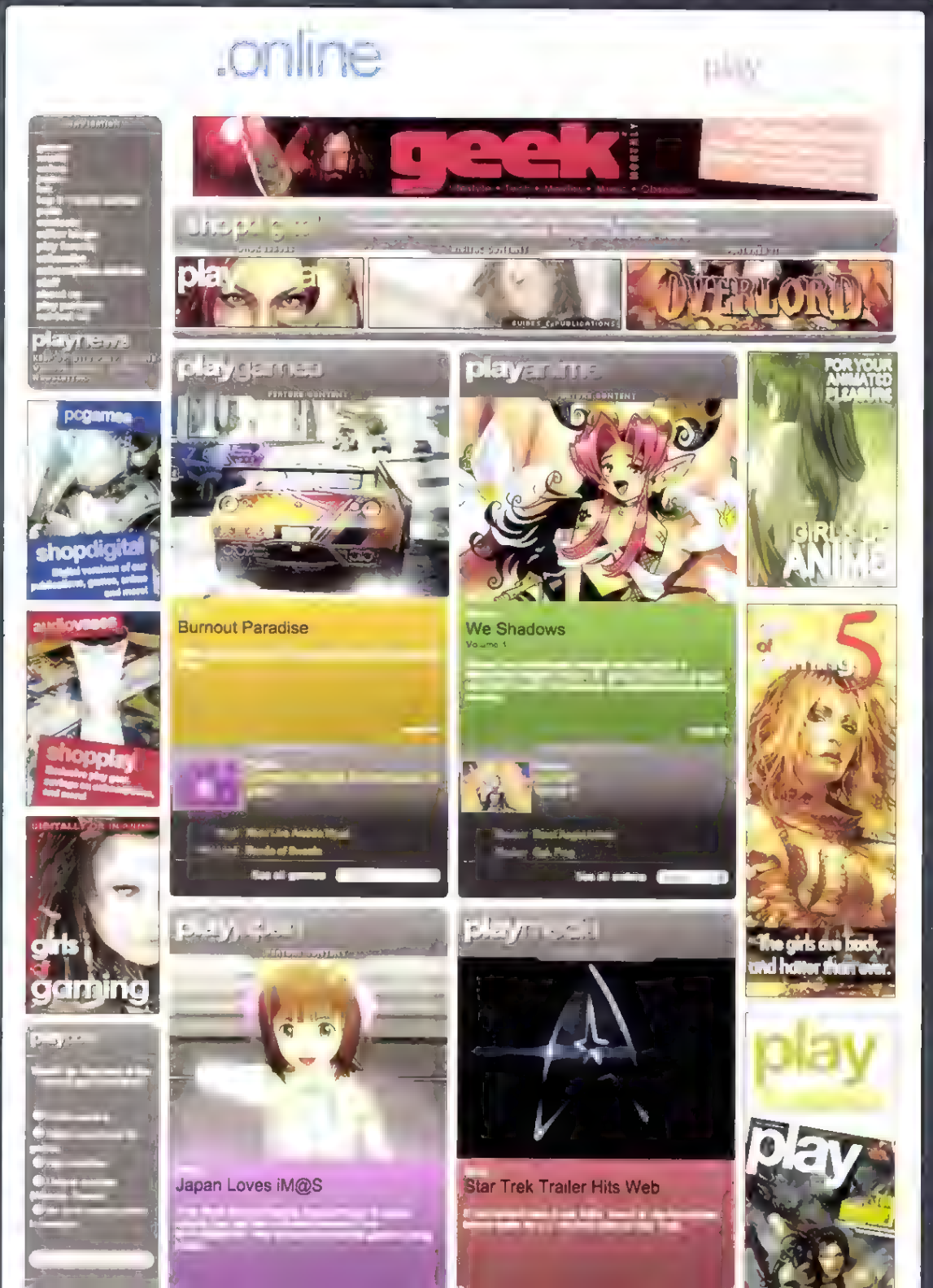


gear

NEC CRVD 42DWX curved display

Just when we thought it couldn't get any better... t gets better! NEC has announced that their 42" curved display will hit the market later this year, featuring a seamless image of 2880x900 resolution, creating a more productive and immersive experience. The CRVD-42DWX's light engine is a combination of LED lighting and a DLP chip, which allows a fast response time, so video should be free of motion artifacts. The 12-bit dynamic range display means fantastic clarity and image depth along with a 160% HDTV efficient extended color gamut for brilliant colors. In addition, the curved display provides productivity improvements of 10% to 30% over a single monitor. The display is targeted at not only gamers, but full motion video/graphics users as well. In fact, NEC has worked closely with Ostendo Technologies to create a display designed for specialty applications including video editing and photography

TriplePoint Zero Wireless for PS3

Introducing the first aftermarket controller to give the manufacturer's pad a run for its money: the ZeroWireless (for PS3) from TriplePoint. Featuring Multi-Axis Technology for true six-axis response, a unique metal polymer hybrid design, a rechargeable NiMH battery for up to 25 hours of play time (plus a AAA battery compartment back up) and backlit face buttons, the ZW looks super cool and pretty much outperforms the standard pad. Of note are its flush-mounted R2 and L2 shoulder buttons and a 12-foot-long USB/Micro USB cable so you can play while charging. The D-pad action is also super accurate and the action on the dual analogs extremely smooth and taut. This is a great PS3 pad; really the only choice if you're looking for an alternative to the standard pad or additional controllers.
www.nyko.com

TriplePoint Wireless Nunchuk and Perfect Shot for Wii

The company formerly known as Nyko is about to introduce a slew of hi-quality new peripherals for 2008 but none as utterly necessary as the Wireless Nunchuk controller attachment for Wii, which finally takes the annoying tether out of Wiimote waggling. Together with their new Wii gun the Perfect Shot (4 out of 5 people surveyed who use guns prefer it over their regular gun), the pair represents the best Wii gizmos we've tested so far.
www.nyko.com

Directed by:
Starring:
Released By:
Rated:

It was no Pac-Man but Donkey Kong certainly stole plenty of hours from my childhood. I couldn't even begin to guess what my high score hovered around, but I know for sure it wasn't even close to world-champion Billy Mitchell's one-million plus. Watching the fascinating and glum *The King of Kong: A Fistful of Quarters*, you're given an eccentric snapshot of just how big of a deal mastering King Kong is to the likes of Billy Mitchell and his few rivals.

Breaking the Donkey Kong record is serious business. Delegates from the Twin Galaxies League, whose earnest founder and head referee also aspires to be a rock star, are so obsessed with upholding accurate scores they'll go as far as to examine circuit boards from arcade machines and bark if there's an artifact in a submitted tape.

The always comfortably dressed Mitchell, love the American flag tie—would like you to believe he is peerless in his barrel-jumping skills, but the film's central focus is on a rivalry with newcomer Steve Wiebe, who has just lost his job the second he and his family moved into their new Seattle house. That's OK, though, because Steve now has more time to sit in his garage and perfect his mad Donkey Kong skills.

While Steve and Billy softly and humorously spar in their quest for dominance, *The King of Kong* begins to reveal the heart of their vulnerabilities and interesting struggles, unearthing a strange and compelling drama about the human condition of obsession and dedication.

A handful of bit players come onto the scene as Wiebe takes his skills on the road challenging Mitchell for a live showdown, which he oddly dodges in a fit of defiance. Everyone involved takes Donkey Kong so seriously, you can't help but look on in intrigue at the unexpected fallout and the personalities that push so hard for relevance.

The King of Kong is one of last year's most unusually entertaining films: sad at times and uncomfortably funny, subtly poignant in its characters who are quite unlike what you're used to seeing on the bigscreen. Every gamer should see this documentary. **BF**

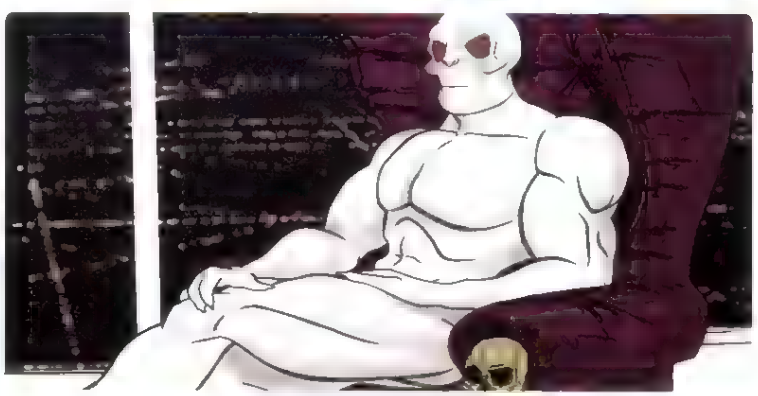
Directed by:
Starring:
Released By:
Rated:

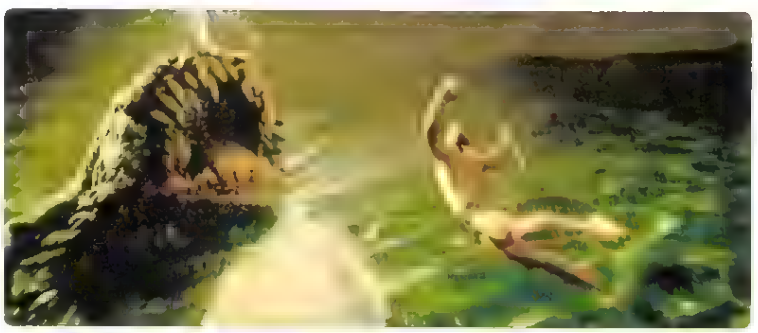
Beowulf moves simply for the wonders of its visions, which stripped away from the IMAX 3D experience reveals just how hallow the film can be at its heart. But that heart still beats strongly enough when director Robert Zemeckis and his rendering wizards pump up the action sequences with enough panache to keep us distracted from the valleys in the story. Even if the images aren't as exciting on a conventional home theater, the technical artistry is quite impressive, taking us one step closer to wholly convincing actors who are completely created in the computer. There is an eeriness to the human likeness that is still ripe to turning some off, but it's hard not to appreciate the delicacy of emotion in the faces. This is a stylized take on the ancient poem that's lively and light, bringing you such unexpected moments as Angelina Jolie rising from a glimmering pool decked out in devil heels. It's worth a one-time look for sure. **Brady Fiechter**

Created by:
Starring:
Released By:
Rated:

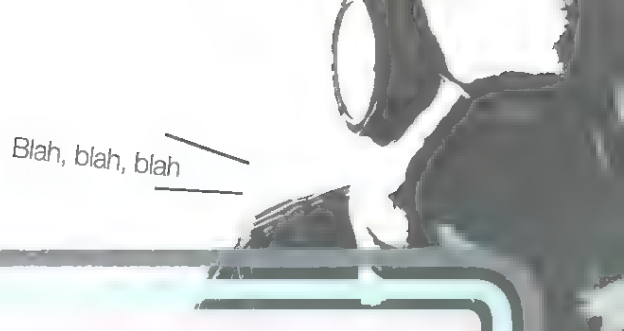
We come to the litmus test for the next generation of "t" humans. People will either love or hate *Frisky Dingo* and it shouldn't have even a red in the Midwest. This is a story about a super villain, Killface—whose goal is to use his Annihilatrix weapon to propel the earth into the sun—and Xander Crews a.k.a. Awesome X, a harpoon of a lampoon on Batman. Having extinguished all of the super villains in the city his adversary/caretaker (resident Alfred) urges him to retire and learn to operate his huge multinational conglomerate, which includes trimming back the five million a year it costs to keep his Awesome X fighting force going. But Killface has problems of his own (man is it hard to keep this spoiler free!). He's short 12 billion to finish the Annihilatrix and ends up having to use direct marketing postcards—"the dry hump of marketing strategies"—to get out his evil message. Meanwhile Crews devises a plan to save his fighting force by retooling all of his factories to make Awesome X dolls... but with no super villain for them to fight the brand is a dead fish. So, Xander needs a super villain (wait till you see his first attempt) and Killface needs $12 billion... You can't guess the rest. In between and betwixt all of the above you have to see how this all goes down to believe it. I guarantee that you've never seen anything like it. I also guarantee uncontrollable laughter/cheering or disgust depending on your world view. I lost my voice.

Frisky Dingo lampoons Batman, hip-hop, Regis and Kelly (I am forever in your debt Adult Swim) corporate sponsors rammed down our throats, and just about everything else that ails discerning humans. Here me and believe me: You need this DVD in your life. Having the entire season at your disposal is so much better than waiting on new episodes. Do whatever it takes to make it so. **Dave Halverson**





BACK OF THE BOOK



03_08 GREG ORLANDO
EXECUTIVE EDITOR

Whatever happens, don't blame me. I'm voting for Bill and Opus.

In this election year, it would be foolish to suggest that anyone cast his vote for president of the United States based on a candidate's feelings about the video game industry. The United States certainly has more pressing issues, to be certain, a wave of entitlement programs that threaten to overwhelm the economy, whether people are smuggling gel-based hair conditioners onto airplanes; and foreign countries that, alternately, need a good invasion or else a good forgetting they exist.

Yet in the small issues, we can see past the chest thumping, the incessant bleat of catchphrases and buzzwords—this year's, notably, being "change"—and the pandering to powerful influences. It's in these miniscule talking points, a candidate can express a true feeling. It's here, then, a candidate can be honest.

As it stands now, the race for the presidency has been narrowed down to four, with a possible fifth, independent, candidate in New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg. Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama have emerged as the frontrunners for the Democrats. John McCain and Mitt Romney remain standing on the Republican side.

Of the five, three of these candidates have made notable statements about the video game industry. Common Sense Media, a national organization, "dedicated to improving the media and entertainment lives of kids and families," posed a series of media-specific questions to the potential candidates.

One of the questions specifically pertained to video games. It asked, "To date, nearly 10 states have considered legislation to keep violent video games out of kids' hands. Would you support this type of legislation at the federal level? What other strategies would you support to keep the video game industry and other media companies from marketing and selling inappropriate content to children?"

Common Sense received responses from Clinton, Obama, and Romney, as well as from also-rans and never wases Bill Richardson (R) and John Edwards (D).

"When I introduced the Family Entertainment Protection Act two years ago, I did so because I felt that video game content was getting increasingly violent and sexually explicit, yet young people were able to purchase these games with relative ease while their parents were struggling to keep up with being informed about the content," Clinton said in her response.

"I was motivated to take action when I found out that there was embedded illicit sexual content in Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas. The Entertainment Software Ratings Board was unaware of the embedded content. I called on the FTC to investigate the source of the content and, as a result, the company issued a recall of the game. When I am president, I will work to protect children from inappropriate video game content."

The Family Entertainment Protection Act died in Congress in 2005. Had it passed, it would have put the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) under federal mandate, and served harsh punishment to game store clerks who sold games rated mature or adults-only to minors.

"I want to restore values so children are protected from a societal cesspool of filth, pornography, violence, sex, and perversion. I've proposed that we enforce our obscenity laws again and that we get serious against those retailers that sell adult video games that are filled with violence and that we go after those retailers," Romney wrote.

"I would call upon the video game industry to give parents better information about programs and video games by improving the voluntary rating system we currently have. Broadcasters and video game producers should take it upon themselves to improve this system to include easier to find and easier to understand descriptions of exactly what kind of content is included. But if the industry fails to act, then my administration would," Obama said.

"And even if the industry does do some responsible self-policing, there's still a role for the federal government to play. We need to understand the impact of these new media better. That's why I supported federal funding to study the impact of video games on children's cognitive development."

As video games grow and become more complex and more involved, it's only natural they'll attract more attention. Video games have become a hot button issue because they're struggling to maturity and dealing with topics they hadn't or couldn't deal with.

We'll see more sex. And more graphic violence. And we'll have history, more recent than we'd like, play out on our game consoles. We'll get it in high-definition, and with slow motion replays, and through sniper-cams, and in every way a video game designer can think to serve it up to us. No one in his right mind would suggest that much of it will play out in some dignified fashion, elevating both the medium of video games and the video game player.

The medium will stretch and groan in the attempt to grow with the increasingly complex technology that powers it. As graphics and processing power improve, hey!, maybe storytelling will too. Maybe game players will be exposed to exotic notions, and diverse historical perspectives, and interact with game characters who are fully developed. Stranger things, certainly, have happened.

It will be a long, hard road. For every Mass Effect, we'll likely get five The Guy Game and Playboy: The Mansions. And when we get a BioShock or a Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas, someone will be there to notice, to perhaps get offended and, in this very litigious age, to sue someone over it. Politicians won't be able to help themselves in that sort of climate.

The American people have balanced personal responsibility and governmental regulation on a scale, and it's fair to say there's a great danger the scale will simply collapse under the weight of regulation. The American spirit of individualism seems to have withered. We want to be protected from McDonald's making us fat, from video games rotting our brains, from every spook and specter under the sun. You can't blame a presidential candidate for picking up that ball and running as far and as fast as he can with that.

Play certainly won't, as a whole, be endorsing a candidate. And it would be ridiculous to expect an endorsement from a man who would, likely, welcome a cartoon penguin and (dead?) cat as his commander-in-chief and vice-president.

Just vote. And know that there's merit in even the tiniest of issues.

(A full recounting of the candidates' responses to Common Sense's questions may be found at: http://www.commonsensemedia.org)

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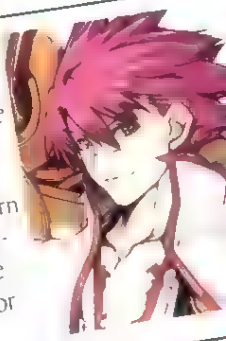

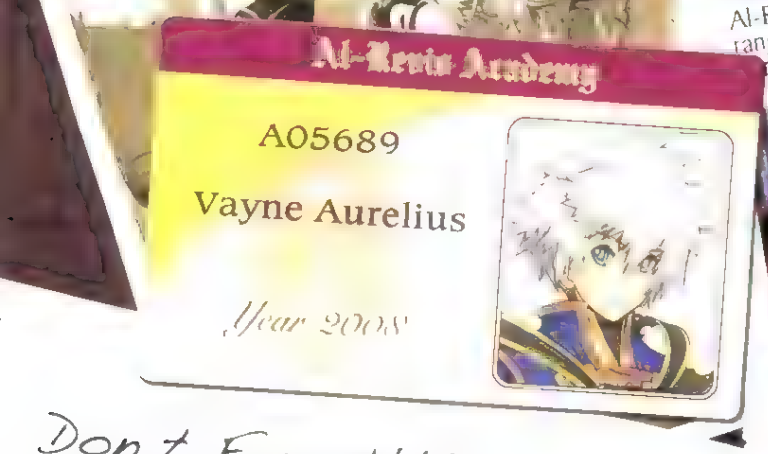

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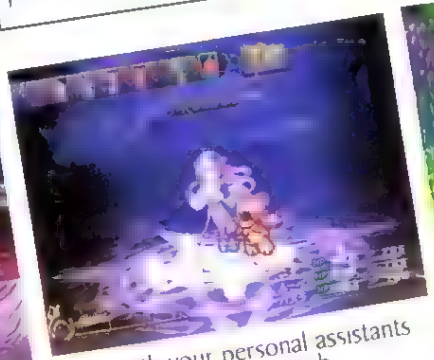

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Here is a another

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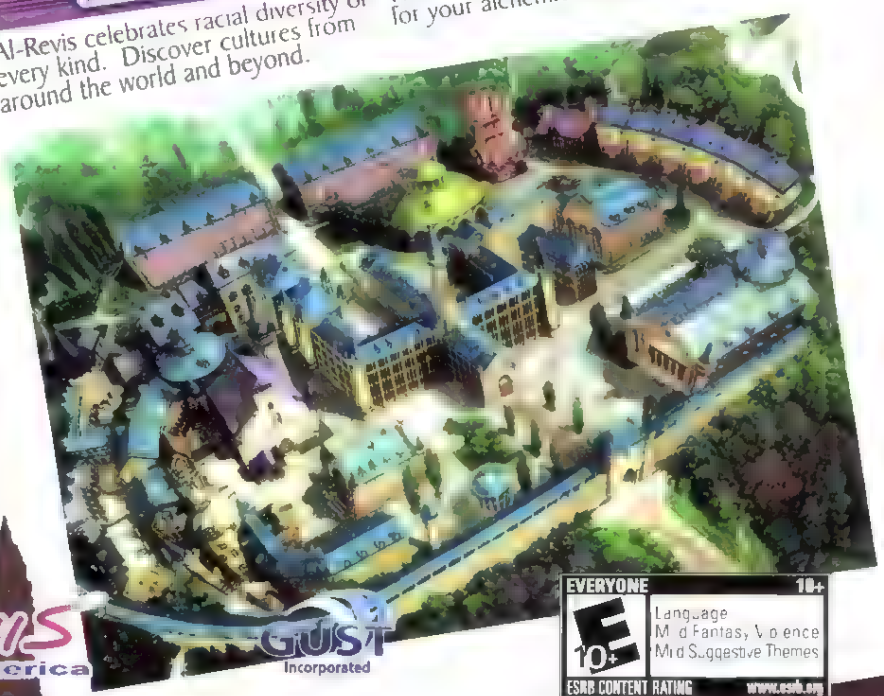

PlayStation 2

NIS America

GUST Incorporated

EVERYONE 10+

ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.org

Language
Mild Fantasy Violence
Mild Suggestive Themes

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